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A girl turned two brothers into deadly enemies. And the wrong one was on the right side—of the law!

NO TROUBLE AT ALL (Short—5,400) by H. B. Hickley 78

Illustrated by Ed. Boecher

Mancuso had no trouble untangling the mess . . . once he decided which girl had the most to lose.

THE CORPSE KEEPS COMPANY (Novelet—14,000) . . . by Julius Long 90

Illustrated by Arnold Kohn

Mortgages and lawsuits seem dry as dust and about as interesting—until somebody spills blood on them!

RUN, RABBIT, RUN (Short—7,500) by Frances M. Deegan . . . 118

Illustrated by William A. Gray

When murder spills blue blood over the Oriental rugs, it takes a red-blooded guy to clean up the mess.

FORTY-CENT TIP (Novelet—12,000) by Harrison B. Latimer . . . 132

Illustrated by William A. Gray

At this murder trial, the defendant's lawyer had far more at stake than the life of his client.

FROZEN FOOD—FOR THOUGHT (Short—2,500) . . . by Glenn Low 154

Illustrated by Rod Ruth

There wasn't anything or anybody that Bat Elzey wasn't 'way ahead of—except maybe the calendar . . .

"AW, HELL, I'LL WALK!" (Short—5,000) by Robert Moore Williams 160

Illustrated by H. W. McCauley

McClain walked into a fraudulent claims racket. But when he got all the facts, he kept right on walking!

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JANUARY 1947

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Front cover painting by Arnold Kohn illustrating a scene from "Blood on the Moon"

**MAMMOTH
DETECTIVE**

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Volume 6
Number 1

OFF THE **BLOTTER**



AWAY back in 1942 a young man named Dwight V. Swain was writing some of the best fiction we have ever read. He was fairly new in the field at the time, but he came up fast as was just on the edge of receiving the acclaim to which he was entitled.

THEN the Army stepped in, deciding that Dwight would be a lot more valuable to his country by using a gun in place of a typewriter. Rather reluctantly—like a great many other young men—he agreed . . . and, except for an occasional letter, that is the last we heard of Dwight V. Swain. The last, that is, until a few months ago, when he came strolling into our office, back in civilian clothes again, and announced that he was ready to take up where he left off.

THERE'S no point in going into how happy that made both of us feel. Anyway, we gave him three cheers and a photostat of a cover painting Arnold Kohn had made for us shortly before. A few weeks later, in came a 37,000 word manuscript with Dwight's name in the upper left-hand corner of page one. By the time we were half way into the story all doubt was gone that four years away from the typewriter would effect this author's ability to write. We honestly believe Dwight is a far better craftsman today than he was before the war . . . and "Blood on the Moon," the short novel leading off this month's

issue is the evidence we offer to support that claim! There's no point in taking the edge off it by telling you here what the story is about; it begins on page eight and you are respectfully urged to turn to that page and start finding out for yourself.

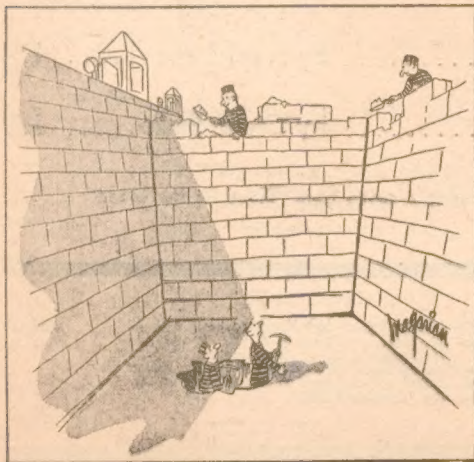
IN THE November issue of MAMMOTH DETECTIVE, you met a private detective named Mancuso—a quietly competent gentleman—in H. B. Hickey's short story titled "Diamonds for My Darling." Well, Mancuso is back again, this issue, in a superlative bit of writing called "No Trouble At All," in which he proves once more what all good detectives know: the answer to most crimes can be found in the character of the people concerned.

A NAME you've seen on a great deal of excellent fiction in both "pulp" and "slick" magazines, is that of Julius Long. You'll find his name on "The Corpse Keeps Company," and we're as pleased at having him on our contents page as you will be with the story itself. Here is a yarn that will give you a different concept of what actually takes place when a private detective sets out to solve a puzzle—a puzzle that has to do with murder and an involved lawsuit.

IT IS Frances M. Deegan who makes a habit of furnishing each issue's off-the-trail story. This month she has done it again, with "Run, Rabbit, Run." It tells of a young man who has never done anything more aristocratic than elevate his right pinkie while inhaling a cup of tea. But he followed his girl friend right in among the blue-bloods . . . and made the embarrassing discovery that when one of the society crowd gets murdered, the blue blood just naturally comes out red! What happens after that is left up to your curiosity—until you read the story.

A NEWCOMER to these pages, one Harrison B. Latimer (it sounds like somebody's pen-name), offers you "Forty Cent Tip." For you readers who like all the drama of an excellent court room scene, this story is heartily recommended.

TWO fine short stories close out the issue. Next month will bring a short novel by William P. McGivern, plus six other yarns.—H. B.





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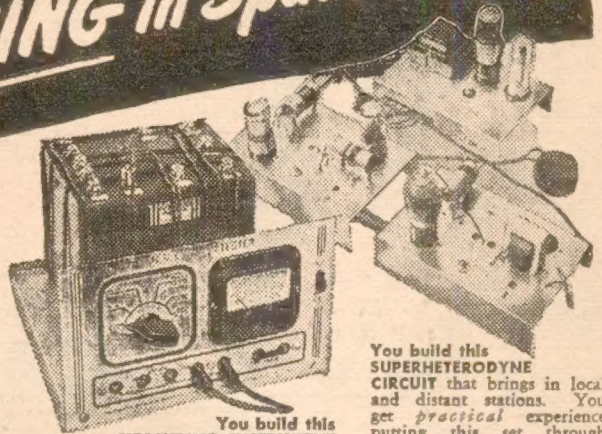
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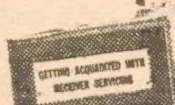


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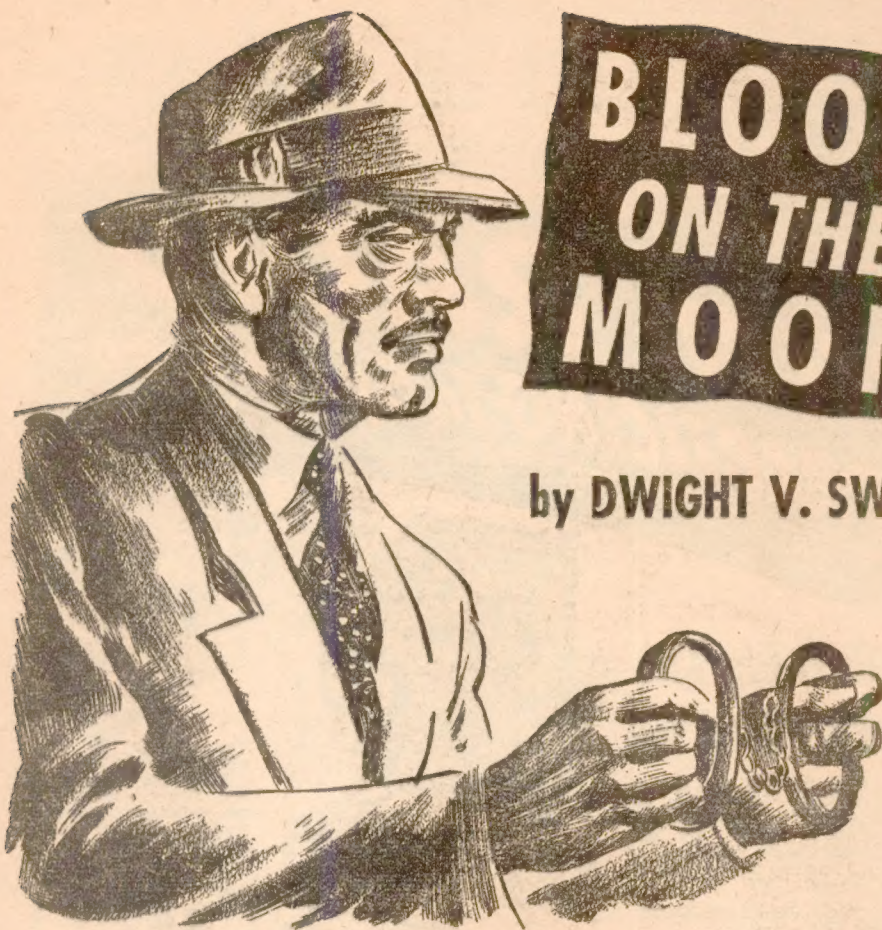
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BLOOD ON THE MOON

by DWIGHT V. SWAIN

PRISON towns are tough," Blair said. "This one sticks with the rule."

"Please, Frank—" The girl's slim fingers touched the grey covert of his sleeve. Her voice was low, beseeching, her flame-sheathed body close.

Dogged, unheeding, he pressed on:

"The state pen here makes this a tough town, Helen. And the toughest spot in this tough town—the worst of the bunch, the one where all the devilment starts—is this ginmill. The Hideaway Club." He laughed harshly. "Moe Evans picked the right name for it, Helen. The Hideaway—for all the scum that spews out of a mean state pen."

"Frank, you promised—"

"To hell with the promise!" Rocky lines slashed across the warm good-nature of his lean face. The brown eyes were suddenly hard, the rawboned body stiff under the grey covert suit. He straightened. Stood back from the polished hardwood of the bar. Swept the room in one savage, contempt-laden glance. "Look at it, Helen. Try to see it straight. Get underneath the chrome and red leather and pine panelling. Forget the soft lights, and the dance floor, and Duke's New Orleans Band—"

She patted his hand, tried to laugh; but there was a break in the silver of its note.



To Frank Blair's way of thinking, if he loved a woman he would do anything for her—even if it meant being a partner in murder!

"A girl has to eat, Frank, and all I know is singing."

"Then marry me. You'll eat." He gripped her arm, his voice harsh with tension. "Do anything, Helen—anything! Only get out of here. You know as well as I do, this place is loaded for trouble."

"I'm sorry, Frank." She choked on the words, as if with sudden pain. "I can't do it now—"

"Why not? At least tell me the reason. Don't always dodge it—"

"Please, Frank. . . ." Her grey eyes were big, the lids brimming. "Can't you understand? Can't you take my word for it? I can't marry you now, and I can't tell you why, and I have to go on singing—"

"Then some other place!" he pressed fiercely. His fingers bit into her wrist's soft flesh. "There's half a dozen decent nightclubs that would jump at the chance to get you—"

She shook her lovely head. The golden waves of her hair rippled about her bare shoulders like a field of ripe wheat under a summer sun.

"None of them would pay me half as much as Moe Evans, Frank. And . . . there are . . . other reasons. . . ."

A guttural chuckle broke in upon them.

"Right again, baby! I'm glad you know which side your bread's buttered on, even if your fancy-pants boy-friend don't."

BLAIR swung around. His brown eyes were hard, hostile.

Moe Evans stood there, squat, porcine, Cecil Johnson at his heels.

"This is a private conversation, Evans—"

"Not when you're trying to steal my canary, Blair." Evans knocked non-existent ash from the ragged stump of cigar that was his trademark, jammed

it back between his yellowing teeth. His black eyes were sparking menace, his fat face molded in greasy brass.

Behind him, Cecil Johnson smirked.

"I'm afraid Mister Blair doesn't approve of the Hideaway's sinful atmosphere, Moe," he mocked. "Probably it's his detective brother's influence—"

"Leave my brother out of this, Johnson."

Johnson raised an insolently quizzical eyebrow. Shrugged his tweed sports jacket around his sloping shoulders as he folded his arms.

"Yes, Moe, it must be his brother. Probably they feel we're liable to corrupt the lady. You know how policemen's moronic minds work."

Blair's eyes were cold upon him.

"Your face is awfully pretty, Johnson. I'd hate to have to make it over."

"See, Moe? He's tough! He wants to hit people!" Johnson's tongue was a whiplash of sarcasm, his handsome face a mocking mask. He smoothed his narrow line of mustache, eyes dancing derisively, thin lips twisted in a Cheshire-cat smirk. "You misunderstood us, Blair. We're really a most moral little group."

He paused. Smirked again, as if savoring the flavor of the words he was about to speak:

"Take me, for example, Blair. I'm from Miss Humphries' home town. I helped her get her job here. I've taken care of her like she were my own child." He chuckled, raised one eyebrow in a half-leer. "Tell Mister Blair how carefully we've nurtured you, Helen. Help him to understand you're among friends . . . how well I've known your background, your family." Once more he paused, unpleasant little lights gleaming in his eyes. "Or shall I tell him? There are some interesting aspects—Ray Humphries . . . the seventy thousand dollars—"

Helen Humphries' face was a twisted mask of anguish, her voice a tear-choked sob.

"Stop it, Cecil! Stop it!"

Frank Blair's left hand shot out. He caught Johnson by the front of the tweed sports jacket. His right fist knotted, drew back.

"All right, Fashion Plate! You asked for it—!"

"Frank! Don't! Stop it!" Helen was between them, her body blocking Blair, clinging to him, holding back his blow. "Can't you see what you're doing? How you're hurting me—making me the center of a barroom brawl—?"

Blair hesitated. His grip on Johnson's jacket relaxed.

Still laughing, still mocking, the other twisted free.

"Sorry your boy-friend's so emotional, Helen. An unstable thyroid, perhaps. . . ."

He moved off down the bar.

Moe Evans gave vent to a snort of disgust. He stalked away toward the dance-floor.

FRANK Blair leaned back against the bar. His hands were shaking with unspent anger, his jaws tight knots of tension.

"You still want to stay, Helen?"

The girl's grey eyes were downcast.

"Yes."

"Then maybe I'd better go."

Her tear-streaked face came up.

"No, Frank! Please!" She clung to his arm, breathing hard. Her firm young breasts rose and fell jerkily beneath the thin scarlet of her gown, as from the exertion of a long, hard run. "I couldn't stand that, Frank! Don't leave me now!"

For a long, tense moment Blair stared down at her. Then his hand again gripped hers. He swallowed hard, his throat suddenly too small for the feel-

ings that welled within him.

"I'll never leave you, Helen!" he whispered fiercely. "Never! You can count on me, always, no matter what comes."

The girl came close. Her forehead pressed against his lean, tanned cheek.

"I'm praying you mean it, Frank." Her voice was a zephyr's caress, her body against his a promise of paradise. "Only now I have to go. It's time for me to sing again."

"In a minute." Blair raised a hand, flagging down little Sam Yerxa, the waiter. "Sam! That corsage I gave you to put on ice—"

"Jus' a minute, Mister Blair." The little man darted away. Returned, a moment later, a florist's box in his hands.

"Thanks, Sam." Blair tossed him half a dollar. "They're for you, Helen."

The girl tore away the tie of green tape. Gazed down at the roses that reposed in the nest of green tissue. Red roses, not yet fully open, sparkling with dew.

"Frank! They're lovely—"

His big hand wrapped around hers, engulfed it. His face was flushed, his voice husky.

"Not half so lovely as you, Helen." He hesitated. "I'm sorry about the color. I thought you might wear the black dress—"

She laughed. It was like the ripple of sunlight on a spring morning.

"As if I cared, silly! I'll wear them anyhow." She squeezed his hand. "But I do have to go. . . ."

She was moving away, then, and Frank Blair was leaning back, muscles weak, lips dry, head giddy.

Ed Garrity came toward him behind the bar, eyes ever wary, square, battered face in sullen contrast to the starched white of his service coat.

"You want something more, Mister

Blair?"

"Bourbon, Ed."

Already Blair's eyes were fixed on the little stand over by the band. His breath was coming faster.

A clarinet wailed like a lost child crying in the night. The lights dimmed.

Again the clarinet gave forth its lament.

A saxophone picked up the strain. Then a trumpet. A thread of melody was born. Others joined in—a trombone, a bass, a sultry, throbbing drum-beat.

The thread of melody grew, took form. It swelled into a song.

Plaintively melancholy it was, that song, and in a mourning minor key. Half blues, half barrelhouse, all panting primal passion. Basin Street . . . Beal Street . . . South Clark Street. 'Frankie and Johnny,' 'Saint Louis Woman,' 'Birmingham Jail,' rolled into one. The song of the woman whose love was so great it would not die, but turned to hate instead; whose arms ached only to hold her man, until at last her shaking fingers clutched a razor.

Helen Humphries' song—

SHE came out of the shadows, her body a sinuous scarlet flame set off by the golden ripple of her hair. Floated to the stand, pale wraith of loveliness in a throbbing jungle night. A light picked her as she swayed there, smiling, oval face aglow, ripe lips scarlet as the gown she wore.

It was for all of them, that smile—for Moe Evans, squat and fat and ugly, close-set black eyes acrawl with greed and lurking evil as he watched her every motion. For Cecil Johnson—debonair, casual, handsome face still twisted in its cynic's sneer. For the pale, gaunt stranger beside him, hunched hungrily forward now, blue eyes hot with lusting.

For Ed Garrity, behind the bar, enveloping her in a sullen, smouldering stare. For Sam Yerxa, the waiter, with his shifty, haunted look. For all of them—the hundred or more, jammed into the Hideaway Club's hot stench and smoky murg to hear her sing.

Her slender hand came up to the corsage of red roses, then, graceful as the preenings of a snow-white swan. Touched the flowers in a lover's caress, where they rested on the gentle swell of her breasts. Next to her heart they were, rising and falling with every breath she drew. Still dewy, still sparkling, putting the very crystals of her necklace to shame. Her grey eyes were shining now, too—shining as only the eyes of a woman in love can shine, as she looked down at Frank Blair.

A tall man, Blair. Young enough, but with age not too easily calculated into years. Rawboned, rangy, with wide shoulders and narrow hips, draped in a grey covert suit that fitted, and accessories that showed enough taste. A lean, tanned face that found it easier to laugh than frown. Brown hair, unruly, to match his eyes—warm eyes, friendly, eyes that saw only Helen Humphries.

The music slowed; faded to muted background. A blue spot turned the shimmering gold of Helen Humphries' hair to moonlight.

Her voice was a soul in torment, alive with anguish, throaty as the smoke-filled bar. It reached out to touch them, to probe them, to tear at their hearts. It mocked and it threatened; lamented, cajoled. Her body swayed with it, part of it, flesh turned to music, to bewitch their souls—

*"I've waited, I've hated, I've prayed
you'd come soon,
But you wouldn't listen. Now I've
changed my tune."*

You'll have trouble, but double—a raging typhoon—

Blood on the moon, man! Blood on the moon!"

It cast a spell, that song, the way Helen Humphries sang it. It gripped them, held them as if petrified, long after the last mourning note had faded away.

Then, like a dam, it broke, and they were whistling and stomping and cheering like men gone mad.

FRANK BLAIR'S fingers were trembling when it ended. His breath came hard. His stomach was a tight knot of emotion. The bourbon in his glass slopped over as he raised it.

Helen was beside him, then, her fingers cool on the back of his hand, the grey eyes warm, the red lips smiling.

"Did you like it, Frank? I was singing for you, just then."

His fingers gripped hers. When he spoke, his voice was husky.

"Like it!" he breathed. "Helen, the things you do to me—"

"I know." The grey eyes were misty, the lips atremble. "It works both ways, Frank. . . ."

Heedless of the crowd about them, as if they were in a private world all their own, his arm encircled her lithe young body, pulled her to him, hard against him.

"Helen—"

"I know, Frank."

She broke away. Forced out a breathless little laugh. Color touched her cheeks.

"That's all for now, Frank. I've got to circulate. Moe will claim I'm not earning my pay."

Then, from the club's door, a harsh voice slashed in upon them.

"What's your business here, kid?"

A loud voice, and clear. Bitterly,

calculatedly clear. It carried to the farthest table.

A sudden hush gripped the Hideaway Club.

Blair's rawboned body stiffened beneath the grey covert suit. In that moment, he aged ten years. His brown eyes were suddenly bleak.

Slowly, he turned.

The man who had spoken was solid, rather than big. He had a face carved from a swamp-soaked tamarack stump with a dull knife. His dark snap-brim hat was set square on his head, his hands thrust deep into his topcoat's slash pockets. He stood with feet wide apart, chin outthrust, big shoulders hunched.

"Hello, Al." There was an edge to Blair's voice.

"I asked you a question! What's your business in this dive?"

Blair's lean face took on new lines.

"I stopped in for a drink," he answered curtly. A pause. "If that's any of your business, Al."

Anger lit tiny flames in the other's cold green eyes.

"My kid brother's doings are always my business!" His tongue was vitriol-dipped. "Of course, when I find you here, there's another angle. People who hang out at the Hideaway Club have a way of getting cops' attention." He stopped. Stared coldly around the club. Then: "Come on, kid. You're getting out of here."

He turned on his heel.

The hackles were rising on the back of Frank Blair's neck. His lips were rough and dry.

"I'm sorry, Al. That angle won't wash." His voice was flat, rasping. "When I was a kid, I expected my brother to boss me around. Now I'm twenty-eight. The war took me away for a long time. I learned to pick my own friends." He stopped, and his

brown eyes seemed to sink within their sockets. The lean face was like carven stone. "I'm going to go on picking 'em, Al. Without any help from you."

AL BLAIR'S eyes had the cold sheen of Mexican jade. His face was a dark mask of fury.

"I guess you got too much education, kid!" he grated. "I thought college would do you good, but it's made you too smart. That, and having a high-paid job, and spending three years in the damn' Army's Criminal Investigation Division." He stopped. Glared. "Pick your own friends, do you? Then I'll say you show damn poor judgment!"

He broke off sharply. Stepped back, green eyes sweeping the room.

"Scum!" he rasped. "Scum, one and all! This deadfall should be a sewer, not a nightclub!"

Moe Evans crowded forward. His cigar was twitching jerkily, his fat face contorted and crimson, his beady black eyes pools of pure hate.

"Cop or not, you can't talk like that here!" he snarled. "I'll—"

Al Blair turned on him.

"You'll what?" he challenged savagely. "Throw me out, is that it?" His laugh came straight from hell. "Try it, Evans! Just try it!"

He spun back to his brother, his voice a whiplash of scorn.

"So these are your friends! Moe Evans—with a brother over in the big cage for a first degree job! Ed Garrity, the hotshot bartender, who's a two-time loser on the side! Cecil Johnson—he gave up banking to run a bookie joint! Sam Yerxa, the boy with the burglar tools!"

He strode toward the end of the bar, past the pale, gaunt stranger with the chill blue eyes.

Or almost past.

He stopped short behind the stranger, spun about with lightning speed. His hands flashed up and out, over the man's shoulders. Caught the stranger's lapels, peeled his coat back off his shoulders and down his arms.

The gaunt man let out a muffled curse. Twisting, jerking, writhing, he slid from his bar stool. His right hand snatched vainly for the shoulder-holstered gun that hung revealed under his left armpit.

AS SUDDENLY as he had struck, Al Blair let go. His right hand heaved in a shove, sent the other reeling back across the barroom floor.

"You want to go for that gun now?" he cried. "You were goddamn anxious to get it a minute ago. You want it now?"

The blue-eyed gunman's gaunt face contorted. His eyes flamed hate. But his hands stayed far out in the open, away from the shoulder holster.

"Not today, chum!" he grated between clenched teeth. "This ain't my day to draw on cops. Not around witnesses."

Again Al Blair's harsh laugh rang out. His eyes sought his brother.

"Some friends you've got, kid!" he cried. "Tough guys! Gunmen! But no guts to shoot with, unless the other guy's back is turned. They talk big, and they crawl small—"

Frank Blair's face was pale beneath its tan.

"Al, for God's sake!" he pleaded. "You're blowing your top—"

"So now I'm blowing my top, am I? I see you headed straight for hell and I try to stop you, so I'm blowing my top!"

"Al, don't make a fool of yourself!" Frank Blair lashed. "You know better than to think I'm tied up with Moe Evans, or Ed Garrity, or Cecil Johnson,

or Sam Yerxa, or any of the rest. That's not why I'm here—"

"Then why are you?"

"I'll tell you!"

It was Helen Humphries. Her face was pale, emotion-straight, her voice on the verge of breaking. Head held high, she started forward.

"Helen! Stop!" Frank Blair snatched at her arm.

She jerked free, came close to Al Blair.

"I'm the reason your brother comes to the Hideaway Club, Mister Blair." Her grey eyes met his glare head-on. "He comes here to see me. He's asked me to marry him—"

Al Blair seemed to shrivel, to shrink within his clothes.

"So that's it." His harsh voice was flat, bitter, vindictive. His green eyes stared Helen Humphries up and down in cold appraisal.

When he spoke again, it was to his brother.

"It gets clear now, kid. Moe Evans and the rest of these rats hate my guts. They can't stand having even one honest cop around. So they slicked this peroxided trollop on you—"

"Al—I!" Frank Blair's voice was every bit as harsh, as flat, as the detective's. "You're my brother, Al, but so help me God, if you go on—"

Al Blair's rough-hewn face twisted. The green eyes were horribly alight.

"What's the matter, kid? Can't you take it?" he jeered. "These hoods wanted to get you, and they did—with a two-bit tramp straight out of the gutter—"

"Damn you, Al!"

IT WAS a sob, more than a snarl, more pain than hate. But Frank Blair was charging as he shouted, shaking off Helen Humphries' frantic hands, hurling himself forward. His rangy,

rawboned body was transformed into a fighting machine, his big hands knotted into fists.

Savagely, he hurled a blow.

His brother tensed to meet it.

Like a thunderbolt, Frank's fist came in, under Al's guard. With all his weight behind it, it connected, square to one side of his elder brother's mouth. It smashed the detective backward to the floor. Sent him sliding, all asprawl.

"Al—I!"

Frank Blair stopped short, all the anger torn out of him with that one fierce blow. He stared, half-dazed, at his own right fist, then at his brother, prostrate on the floor.

"Al!" he choked again. He stumbled forward. Tried to drag the other from where he lay.

"Let go of me!" Al Blair shook off the hand as if it were a snake. Pulled himself to his feet unaided. A little rivulet of blood trickled from the left corner of his bruised and puffing mouth. His voice crawled with utter loathing. "Keep your dirty paws off me, you cheap hood!"

Back in the shadows, someone laughed.

Al Blair whirled, face set. Eyes shining like polished jade, he searched the room with his glance. The seconds ticked by in silence.

"My brother hit me and got away with it," he rasped. "That's because he's my brother. Anyone here who thinks that makes me a pushover can come out right now."

Again silence. The kind of silence that throbs and echoes like a living thing.

A harsh laugh passed Al Blair's swollen lips. He pulled a handkerchief from his pocket, wiped away the blood that had trickled from the corner of his mouth. Every gesture, every motion, radiated contempt as a fire gives off

heat.

Grimly, then, he turned back to Frank Blair. His swart, chiseled face was cold and hard as granite.

"That did it, kid!" he said tightly. "I'll boss you no more. Do what you want to. And when trouble comes—as it will—you'll get the same from me as you'd get from any other cop.

"You go your way, Frank Blair, and I'll go mine. I'm through being your brother!"

He turned on his heel. Face stony, head held high, arrogance in every step, he stalked away.

The Hideaway Club's heavy door slammed shut behind him with a sound like the knell of doom.

CHAPTER II

PHYSICALLY they stood there to-side by side, through what seemed like eons of painful, creaking silence. But it was only in body that they were close. All at once it was as if Al Blair had somehow reared an invisible brick wall between them.

Ed Garrity approached them. Battered face still sullen, eyes wary and unfriendly, he ignored Frank Blair.

"You got a call, Helen. On the bar phone, there." He jerked one thick thumb over his shoulder, back toward where the gaunt man with the shoulder holster had again resumed his drinking beside Cecil Johnson.

"Thanks, Ed." Helen Humphries' voice was dull, her eyes lacklustre. And then, to Blair: "I'll say goodbye to you now, Frank. It's time for me to sing again, anyhow."

Blair lean's face was drawn, his brown eyes moody.

"Sure. I know. I'll be on my way."

Slowly, Helen turned and walked away. The lilt, the buoyancy had gone from her. She stooped wearily, slipped

under the bar gate, picked up the phone.

The life had gone out of Blair's face, too. The Hideaway Club's hot reek was suddenly oppressive, the dim lights and 'intimate atmosphere' nauseous.

Moe Evans stalked heavily across the dance-floor. His cigar was tilted at an aggressive angle, his fat face set in belligerent lines. He stopped in front of Frank Blair, black eyes angry chips of polished jet.

"It's time you were moving, Blair!" he glowered. "I don't want any more of your trade. Beat it—and don't come back!"

Blair did not even deign to answer. His eyes were still moody, unseeing pools. He drained his bourbon at a gulp; it left a bitter taste in his mouth.

Evans badgered: "Well, what are you waiting for? I said get out!"

For a brief moment fire flashed in Blair's brown eyes. Then it died, and his shoulders sagged in mute defeat. Wearily, he set down his shotglass. Turned toward the bar phone for one last look at Helen Humphries.

He stiffened.

She stood there, still lovely, the golden hair cascading over bare shoulders like non-sparkling foam on a white sand beach, the scarlet gown a sheath of flame over the ripe curves of her lithe young body.

But now that body was taut as a violin's E-string, the firm, uptilted breasts straining against the gown's imprisoning bodice with every tumultuous breath. Her scarlet lips were garish, ghastly, in the drawn white mask that was her face, her grey eyes blank with sudden shock.

Then, even as Blair watched her, she hung up the receiver. Her hand was trembling so that it rattled the phone against the hook like a die in its cup. As if in a coma she slid back under the bar gate and out into the room.

In four great strides Frank Blair was

at her side. He gripped her arm.

"Helen! What is it?"

She stared up at him, but her eyes were glazed. She did not answer.

He shook her, tried again: "What is it, Helen?"

THE film fell away from her eyes, but what replaced it was worse. Terror . . . frenzy . . . sheer animal panic—they vied with one another, a weird, incredible kaleidoscope within her eyes.

Blair's hand fell away, as if a blow had been struck him.

"Helen—!" he choked.

But control was returning to her.

"I—I've got to go now, Frank."

"But that call—what was it?"

"I've got to go now."

There was purpose in her voice again, and the kind of determination that slashes through stone and steel. That, and distance. A new gulf was separating them, a gulf wider, deeper, more impassable than ever space or time or change could make.

"But—"

"Moe won't like it if I'm not on time to sing, Frank," she said from beyond the farthest star. The color was coming back to her cheeks. The grey eyes were once more cool, self-possessed. "I'll have to make up before I go on."

She was gone from his side, then, moving off across the floor toward the narrow corridor that led to the dressing rooms. Again she seemed to drift, buoyant as a cloud, lovely head held high and proud. Yet with all her grace, she was moving with almost incredible speed, feet atwinkle, skirt held clear with casual artistry.

For a long moment Frank Blair stood where she had left him, staring after her. His brown eyes were narrowed in puzzlement, his forehead drawn and furrowed into a frown.

Ever so casually, Cecil Johnson was

rising, drifting off toward Moe Evans' pine-panelled office. The gaunt gunman was on his feet, too, moving toward the Hideaway Club's door. But Blair hardly saw them.

Suddenly, then, he galvanized into action. Whirled, sprang to the bar. He caught Ed Garrity's shoulders. Shook him till his teeth rattled.

"Ed! Is there a back way out from the dressing rooms?"

Garrity's battered face was a study in bewilderment, his mouth agape. He stumbled over his own tongue.

"Huh? What? Back way?" And then, catching on: "Sure. Into the alley. Just like the side door, there." He jerked his head toward a half-hidden exit on the far side of the dance-floor.

Blair snarled a curse. He sprinted for the side door. Lunged through it into the alley.

It was black in the alley, black as only the moonless ebon murk of a shadowy slot between two tall buildings can be. Blair stumbled, groped, and cursed again.

Ahead, a sudden parallelogram of yellow light burst forth. A slim, familiar figure darted out, and into the deeper shadows beyond.

"Helen!" Blair cried.

But she did not so much as hesitate. In an instant she was gone, swallowed up, with only the faintest patter of running feet to mark her way.

MADLY, Blair sprinted after her.

Feet pounding, he came abreast the door that had debouched her. He was gaining speed with every step.

The next instant, something seemed to strike at his feet, to catch them, trip him. He felt himself spilling forward, head over heels, before he could even raise his arms to break the fall. Felt the rasp of cinders tearing at his skin as he skidded on face and knees and

elbows.

For a moment he lay half-dazed, muscles paralyzed, head throbbing.

Then, at last, he started to drag himself to his feet.

Something cold and hard and round dug into the back of his neck.

"Jus' take it easy, Mister Blair," a voice said. "Jus' don't you give me no trouble an' I won't give you none."

Blair stiffened, then relaxed. He lay prostrate, making no effort to rise.

The cold, round object went away from his neck.

"Awright, Mister Blair. You can get up now." The voice was shaking just a little. "On'y go slow. Don't make no sudden moves. Jus' take it easy."

Slowly, carefully, Blair got to his feet. He turned to face his captor.

It was little Sam Yerxa, the waiter. He held a snub-nosed automatic in his right hand. It was trembling a trifle, that hand, but it still managed to focus the gun on Frank Blair's midriff a little too accurately to encourage familiarity.

"I hope you know what you're doing, Sam," Blair said. His voice was toneless.

"Don't you worry, Mister Blair. You jus' leave that to me." The little man made a painfully unsuccessful effort to swagger. "Awright, now. We're goin' back inside. Jus' take it easy. Jus' don't make no mistakes an' everything'll be awright."

He prodded Blair in the small of the back with the automatic.

Blair moved forward obediently.

"An' be careful, Mister Blair—"

"Don't worry," Blair grunted sourly. "You're too scared for me to fool with. I just hope you don't stumble; you'd blow me in two."

But his brown eyes were thoughtful as they re-entered the Hideaway Club, a hint of puzzlement in his frown.

They walked down the narrow dress-

ing-room corridor to the pine-panelled room that served as Moe Evan's office.

Evans was standing in the middle of the floor. He whirled as the door opened, snatched the ragged cigar stump from his yellowing teeth.

"You got him, Sam? He didn't make a getaway?"

"You called it, Moe." Yerxa's voice was still shaky, uncertain. "He was after the girl, awright. He was right on her tail." He laughed nervously. "I tripped him."

"I hope you know what you're doing, Evans," Blair broke in. It was the same remark he had made to Sam Yerxa outside a moment before, but this time he made no effort to keep the angry edge from his voice. "I don't like being pushed around at the point of a gun."

HE GLANCED around the office as he spoke. Ed Garrity stood against the far wall, battered face even more sullen than usual. Cecil Johnson sprawled at ease in a leather lounge chair.

"To hell with you!" Moe Evans snarled. He rammed the cigar stump back in his mouth, swung to Johnson.

"O.k., Johnson. This is your party. What do we do next?"

Johnson managed a yawn.

"It seems fairly obvious," he said. "By putting Helen Humphries on the Hideaway's payroll, we lined up what looked like the makings of a juicy seventy - thousand - dollar shakedown, and—"

"Sure, we lined it up!" Evans burst out. He stomped up and down the office, the floor shaking under the impact of his fat-laden frame. "Only where's it got us? Instead of coming through with the seventy grand, this Ray Humphries goes over the wall." He stopped short. "Say! Are you sure—?"

Johnson nodded. For once, his air of ennui was gone.

"I'm as sure of it as I ever was of anything, Moe. I spent too many years working next to Ray Humphries ever to forget his voice, even when I hear it second-hand over a phone." A pause. "Besides, Moe, we've got complete and final proof in the way Helen reacted. She looked like she'd seen a ghost, and you know how fast she ran out."

Moe Evans went back to pacing the floor. His fat jowls quivered as he chewed at his cigar.

"I still don't like it!" he growled. "I've had a feeling it was poison ever since I let you talk me into it. When you try to put the squeeze on a heist guy doing a two-way stretch for first degree and a bank caper, you're begging for flowers and slow music."

"Really, Moe!" Johnson was chuckling. "You're letting your imagination run away with you."

"The hell I am!" Evans exploded. He thrust his face close to the debonair bookie's. "Don't tell me it's imagination just because I got sense enough to know a tight spot when I see one. This guy Humphries is a killer. Now he's crashed out of one of the toughest state pens in the country. Can't you get it through your slick skull that he's probably on his way right here now? And don't think he'll throw powder puffs at us, either—"

Johnson held up a restraining hand.

"Please, Moe! There's no danger whatsoever. Humphries was only finger man on that bank job. It was pure accident that he became mixed up in the killing."

"Sure, sure. You've said that seventeen times." Evans' voice was ragged. "What I want to know is, what do we do about him?"

"Not to mention me," broke in Frank Blair. "I don't go for this shoving

around. I might even hurt somebody—"

"Ever the wag, aren't you, Blair?" Cecil Johnson chuckled. "Ah, well—"

"Shut up!" Moe Evans exploded. "Quit the stalling! I want to know what the score is!"

JOHNSON sobered. He pulled a silver case from his tweed jacket's inside pocket, produced a cigarette. For a moment he smoked in silence. Then: "All right, Moe. Humphries is out. I half expected him to do it, to tell the truth; he thinks the world and all of Helen, and any threat to her would drive him crazy.

"Now that he's out, he has a choice to make. He could come here and clean out the Hideaway, as you suggest. If that was the course he'd decided on, however, there'd be bullet holes in the bar already. Certainly he wouldn't have bothered to call Helen."

"Then what the hell will he do?" Evans demanded, his voice ragged.

Johnson puffed at his cigarette, eyes thoughtful.

"There are several possibilities. For one thing, he might carry out the threat he made at his trial of revenging himself on Tom Oglethorpe, Judge Whitney, and Dave Randolph. Tom was the bank guard and main witness against him; Randolph the prosecutor; and Whitney the judge. All of them are here in town at the moment—Randolph and Whitney attending the bar association meeting, Oglethorpe retired and living here with his children—, so it wouldn't be too hard a job. Or he might go around to see Paul Kramer, the lawyer who defended him, to get some advice; Kramer's practicing here now. Or—"

"I don't give a damn what he *might* do!" Evans ranted. "I want to know what you think he's *going* to do, and

what we're going to do about it. Quit trying to show off how smart you are, and get down to cases!"

Johnson laughed aloud.

"Isn't it obvious?" he asked. "Put yourself in Ray Humphries' place. Here he is, a free man again after nearly five years in prison. Cached somewhere he has seventy thousand dollars." He paused dramatically, eyed his little audience. "Under such circumstances, what would any man do? The answer, of course, is that he decided to grab the money and run while he had the chance. The fact that he called Helen, and that she at once left here, proves it conclusively. She's going with him."

"You mean he's skipped?"

Johnson spread his hands.

"What other real choice was there? Of course he's skipped."

"Then . . . then—" Evans was groping, his fat face an ugly picture of confusion. "What about us? Where do we come in?"

"I thought you'd ask that," Johnson chuckled. He snuffed out his cigarette. "That's where Blair, here, enters."

"So I do come in?" Blair's brown eyes were hard and angry. "I was beginning to wonder about it—"

"Shut up!" Moe Evans lashed. And, to Johnson: "I don't get it. What good will Blair do us?"

"Again, isn't it obvious?" Johnson smoothed his narrow line of mustache. "After all, we're not interested in Ray Humphries himself. What we want is that seventy thousand dollars in bank loot. When the word goes out that Blair's missing, the law will assume that he's with Ray and Helen, especially after that little soiree he had out in the barroom with his brother, Al, the detective, tonight."

"So?" Evans still looked baffled.

"So Helen Humphries knows that Blair isn't with her. Being a smart girl,

she also knows what's probably happened to him. She likes Blair a lot. Therefore, one fine morning, Ray Humphries wakes up to find Helen and his seventy thousand gone. Result: We get the seventy thousand, Helen gets Blair, Humphries gets his freedom, and everybody's happy." The Cheshire-cat smirk came over his face. He spread his hands in a final, conclusive gesture. "You see? Simple!"

Moe Evans' fat face drew into a scowl. His black eyes were beady, suspicious.

"I dunno. It sounds sort of complicated to me. There must be an easier way . . ."

"If there is, I don't know it." Johnson surged to his feet, shook the wrinkles out of his trousers. "At least, it offers us a chance for the money. But since we can't put it into effect for some time, I'm going home to bed."

Humming softly to himself, he started for the door.

"I dunno . . ." Moe Evans repeated doubtfully.

"Then you're pretty thick, Moe," Frank Blair rapped.

"Huh?"

CECIL JOHNSON stopped in his tracks. He raised one eyebrow.

"Just what do you mean by that cryptic remark, Blair?" he demanded.

Blair laughed.

"As if you didn't know." He turned to Evans. "All evening Johnson's been sitting beside that pale-faced red-hot with the shoulder holster."

Evans' fat face mirrored puzzlement.

"Lars? So what?"

"So you're being played for a sucker." Blair's voice was a taunting sneer. "I'll bet Johnson's the one who wanted me caught, too."

"Why . . . yeah."

"Sure." Blair's brown eyes were

sparkling with the devil's own mirth. "Well, Moe, maybe you can figure out the angles when I tell you that this red-hot you call Lars wandered out the front door at the same time Helen headed for the dressing room. With me not following her, he wouldn't have so much trouble keeping on her trail. By now, he's probably staked out, watching Ray and Helen Humphries, waiting for Cecil Johnson to show up so they can collect the seventy grand you boys are so anxious about."

Johnson eyed Blair admiringly.

"What an imagination you've got—"

Even as he said it, he was moving toward the door.

Moe Evans exploded into action.

"Stop him! Stop the double-crossing skunk!" He lunged after Johnson, Ed Garrity close on his heels. Sam Yerxa stood nervously by, shifting from one foot to the other, the automatic loose in his hand.

"Come on, Sam!" Blair sprinted after the others.

The little man stumbled after him.

Blair's last jump carried him into the hall. He stopped short. Spun about.

Sam Yerxa came plunging through the doorway.

Blair's fist whistled in a short, savage uppercut. It caught Yerxa square on the chin. Lifted him off his feet. Sent him back, in an arc, into Moe Evans' office. He was out cold before he landed.

Blair snatched the automatic from the little man's listless fingers. A Mauser 6.35mm with a cracked grip. He thrust it under his belt. Ran the length of the corridor, out of the Hideaway Club, off down the alley toward where his car was parked.

He hesitated, then, while the seconds ticked by. The breezy self-confidence with which he had carried off the play

in Moe Evans' office had left his lean face, replaced by a frown that carved deep furrows in his forehead. His brown eyes were narrowed, uncertain, his lips tight-pressed.

Finally he drove to the nearest drug-store, sought the telephone book.

Paul Kramer—the man whom Johnson had referred to as being Ray Humphries' lawyer—had a home address far out in the rolling wooded hills of Buenavista.

THE drive took Blair twenty minutes. He parked, at last, a block down the winding road from Kramer's address, then walked to where the big house rose, huge and gloomy and forbidding, a towering black monolith set in a thick maze of trees and shrubbery.

For a long moment Blair surveyed it. Then, as a glimmer of light to the rear caught his eye, he cautiously picked his way around the building.

The glimmering light was in a secluded, wing-like room with narrow, diamond-paned leaded glass windows.

Blair edged as close as the heavy shrubbery would permit him. Peered into the room.

Shock paralyzed him there.

"Helen!"

Scarce aloud it was, that taut, exploded name, for it caught in the back of his throat. But there could be no doubt about the woman who inspired it.

She stood there, half facing him, framed in the narrow window, clear and unmistakable. The gold of her hair still rippled to the gleaming white of her bare shoulders, sharp contrast to the scarlet of her gown, the red of the roses she yet wore upon her breast. She was staring at the floor before her. Her face was white as the slim white hand that clutched at her throat as if to tear away a strangler's noose, 'or perhaps hold back a scream of horror. Her lips

were parted, her grey eyes wide, her breasts alive.

Even as Blair watched her, she turned, walked toward him.

For a moment he thought she had seen him.

She veered off, to the right.

A door opened, and more light spilled out into the night. The girl slipped outside.

Blair was moving, too, stalking her as a tiger hunts its prey. He was upon her before she knew it, his arms about her, his hand over her mouth to hold back her panic-stricken cries.

She fought like a wildcat, all teeth and knees and nails.

"Helen! It's me—Frank Blair!" Again and again he mumbled it into her ear, before at last she understood.

Her body sagged limp in his arms. He took his hand away from her mouth.

"Helen, what's wrong in there? Quick! Tell me!"

She clung to him like a frightened child.

"Helen, I've got to know!" His voice pleaded, lashed, cajoled.

"It's—it's nothing—"

"Don't give me that!" he whispered fiercely. "I saw your face!"

"But it isn't—"

He dragged her bodily toward the door.

"No, Frank, no! Don't go in!" Again she fought him, beating at him with her fists, struggling, imploring.

Blair pulled her across the threshold. Lifted her, still struggling, into the room. Then stopped, involuntarily caught his breath, as he saw what lay before him.

A MAN sprawled on the floor, a man still young despite the grey that touched his temples. He lay on his back, eyes open, staring at the ceiling's hewn rafters. His face was contorted

in a queer, strained grimace, and his hands still clutched at his heart. Blood was seeping between the fingers, spreading in a horrid crimson blot over the white shirt he wore beneath his maroon dressing gown.

Blair gripped Helen Humphries' shoulders.

"He's Paul Kramer?"

Mutely, she nodded, her face still horror-straight.

He forced himself to ask that next inevitable question:

"Do you know who killed him, Helen?"

"I—I—" She tried to speak, but the words seemed to choke her. "Oh, Frank—!"

"Do you know, Helen?"

"And . . . if I do, Frank—?"

"Tell me!"

"Please, Frank . . ." Her body was warm against him, her arms velvet bonds about him, the scent of her heady in his nostrils. "You said I could count on you, always, no matter what came."

Strain sculpted harsh lines in Frank Blair's face. His eyes were hot coals, sinking deep within their sockets, his lips thin-etched torment.

"No matter what came, you said, Frank . . ."

His nostrils, his throat, were too small, his hands and feet numb wooden appendages. His body was shaking like an aspen in a mountain gale.

"If you didn't mean it—" Her body writhed in his arms.

All at once he could bear no more.

"I meant it!" he choked. "I said it, and I meant it! I'll stick with you, Helen, no matter what!"

His arms were steel bands about the soft warmth of her body, enfolding her, crushing her to him. His face was against hers, his lungs sucking in her fragrance.

For the second time in that short eve-

ning a harsh, clear voice cut in upon them:

"It's touching, kid, damn' touching. Clark Gable should come around for lessons."

As one, they whirled.

There in the door to the house proper he stood—swart, solid, savage Detective Al Blair!

CHAPTER III

IT WAS a moment taut as the sudden death that hung within the room. Al Blair's square-hewn face was carved in bitter lines. His lips were smiling, but the smile held anything but humor. His green eyes were cold and hard.

"Just like your girl-friend's song, huh, kid? Double trouble, and blood on the moon. Only this time the blood's a hell of a lot closer than the moon."

Frank Blair's jaw sagged. His face paled beneath its tan.

"Al, you're not damn fool enough to believe—?"

His brother's voice was harsh, ruthless.

"When a call comes in to headquarters that Paul Kramer's dead in his study, and then I find a man and a woman who have no business there standing over the corpse with all the guilt in hell on their faces, believing's got no part of it. I hold them on suspicion of murder till I get more facts."

He raised his voice to a bull's bellow.

"Joe! I've found the stiff!"

"But, Al—"

There was no mercy in Al Blair's cold stare.

"I told you this would come, kid. You can't play with fire and not get your fingers burned."

Helen Humphries' grey eyes were wide, unbelieving, her red lips stiff.

"You mean . . . you're arresting us?"

"What do you think?" All Al Blair's restraint was suddenly flung away. His eyes were alight with green fire, his tongue a stinging lash of fury. "Does this look like parcheesi, you slut? Do you have the gall to pull my brother down into a gutter, then squawl because your dress gets dirty?"

A big man loomed in the doorway behind him, cut him off.

"This the stiff, Al?"

"Yeah."

Helen Humphries' body was shaking, her face twisted. Frank Blair gripped her bare shoulders, held her steady.

"It's only suspicion," he said. Desperately, he tried to force confidence into his words. "We'll be out by morning."

"Morning . . ." She sounded dazed. She half turned, buried her face against his shoulder.

The man called Joe plodded stolidly toward them.

"Let's put on some bracelets, friends —" he began.

And then, before Frank Blair could move, Helen Humphries' hand was hard against his belly, snatching at the Mauser automatic in his belt, whipping it out and up. It cracked—again, again. Its stubby barrel coughed lead and flame.

The man called Joe was stumbling backward, his face contorted, his right hand clawing for the gun upon his hip. Across the room, Al Blair was snatching frantically at his left armpit.

"Frank! Come on!"

Already Helen was running, a flash of scarlet streaking toward the door that led to the yard.

For a moment like eternity Frank Blair hung there, suspended, poised between fear and flight. But only for a moment.

He spun, lunged doorward on Helen's heels.

Behind them, a police .38 thundered. Slug-spattered splinters from the door-jamb stung his face.

THEN they were out, plunging through the shrubbery, stumbling into trees, careening across lawns and gardens and pools. Branches tore at their faces, briars at their feet. The heavy reports of two revolvers split the night air behind them. Their lungs were bursting, their muscles water.

In one last desperate spurt they got between two houses. Sagged in the welcome shadows, panting and gasping. Cowered there trembling while the seconds ticked by.

Then Blair was on his feet again. He gripped Helen's hand. "My car's down the block. Come on."

"I—I can't. My legs just won't work, Frank."

Fiercely, he turned on her.

"They've got to work!" he lashed. "You started us on this rat-race, God knows why, and now we can't afford to be caught. Those three shots you fired convicted us of murdering Paul Kramer before any jury that ever lived."

The girl choked back a sob.

"I'm sorry . . ."

"Then get on your feet! By now Al's notified headquarters. In ten minutes every road will be sewed up tight. We've got to get out of here now if we're going."

Swaying with weariness, she rose. Stumbled on through the shadows beside him.

Blair's car was still where he had left it. Silently, they climbed in.

He drove, not back toward the city, but on into the hills. Stopped, at last, on a narrow path deep in a patch of woods.

Helen Humphries' eyes were almost luminous beside him in the dark.

"Why are we stopping here?" she whispered, almost as if afraid to speak aloud.

He made his voice harsh, uncompromising.

"I want the gun."

Silently, she handed it to him. He thrust it back beneath his belt.

"Now I want some facts."

Her shoulder pressed against him.

"You said I could count on you, Frank. No matter what, you said. I'm only asking you to trust me—"

"To hell with that!" he lashed. His teeth were clenched, his lean face drawn. "I've trusted you all the way, on your say-so. Now I want to know what the score is."

"If you'll only have faith—"

"Faith!" He almost choked on the word. "What have I had but faith, and now where has it gotten me?" He caught her wrist. His fingers bit deep into the soft flesh. "You know what I want to know—about Ray Humphries, and the seventy thousand in bank loot, and Paul Kramer dead in his study."

SHE started in the seat beside him. A tremor rippled through her body.

"Frank! You're hurting me." She tried to twist her wrist free.

He did not relax his grip.

"I want to know what the score is!" he said again. And then, with sudden fury: "Do you want me to end up thinking about you the way Al does—figuring you for a cheap little tramp who's playing me for what she can get out of it? Is that it?"

"You know it isn't so, Frank. You know it!" It was too dark for him to see her face, but there were tears in her voice.

Relentlessly, he pressed on:

"How do I know it isn't so? What have you given me to go on?" His fingers bit deeper. "Back there—back

at Paul Kramer's. Did you give me a chance to decide for myself then? You wouldn't so much as tell me whether or not you'd killed him; just asked me to take you on faith. Faith!" He laughed harshly. "So I did it, and what did I get? You grabbed the automatic—let go with it—"

"But I couldn't stay there and be arrested, Frank. I couldn't—"

"Why couldn't you?" His voice was raw, savage. "You blasted out, and now here we are, on the lam, like a pair of hoodlums. Maybe with a murder charge against us in earnest, if you hit that guy Joe right—"

"But I didn't, Frank." She clutched at him. Her breath was hot on his face. "Honestly! I didn't even shoot at him. I just wanted to startle them—to give us a chance to escape—"

"Why? Why was it so damned important for us to get away?"

She sank back, again silent. The seconds ticked by.

Again he probed:

"Who's Ray Humphries, Helen?"

She writhed in her seat.

"I—I—"

"Don't bother lying!" he lashed. "I know too much already to fall for it. I've got the general pattern. I know he's a killer, and that he crashed out of the state pen tonight. I know he was finger man for a bank job—that he's got the loot stashed away somewhere. He's one of your family—Cecil Johnson mentioned that, remember? Now I just want to tie it up. Who is he?"

"Frank—" Her voice was desperate, pleading.

A sudden thought struck him, plunged deep into his vitals like an icy dagger. His hand fell away from her wrist.

"Is he your husband?"

The girl went limp beside him. Silence crawled through the car like a

living thing.

Then:

"He's—he's . . . my brother, Frank. . . ."

Cold sweat was standing out on Blair's forehead. He, too, slumped back, but only for a moment.

He pressed his advantage:

"Did he kill Paul Kramer?"

"I—I don't know."

"But you didn't?"

"No, no, Frank. Of course I didn't kill him. What reason would I have for it?" Her shoulders were shaking again, her body racked with sobs. "Can't you understand, Frank? I didn't know what I was getting into when I took that job at Moe Evans' Hideaway Club. It was just a chance to be near Ray, and to sing. Then I found that what they really wanted was a weapon to use against Ray—to force him to tell where the money from the robbery was. By then, I couldn't leave, because they told me they'd have Ray killed; men are murdered in prisons, too. . . ."

STUBBORNLY, Blair fought down the impulse to put his arms around her, to draw her to him, to comfort her.

"Then what happened tonight?"

"He—he called, there at the Hideaway. He told me he'd escaped, that he had to see me. He wanted me to meet him at Paul Kramer's. By the time I'd found a cab and come out, Kramer was . . . there, on the floor . . ."

"And Humphries?"

"I didn't see him, Frank. I rang the bell, and then when no one answered, I went around to the back, where the light was burning . . ."

Blair's brown eyes were thoughtful, his lips pursed.

"You don't know where Ray Humphries is now?"

"No."

"Then we're in a spot, Helen." His voice was quiet, his tone calculating. He put his arm around her slim shoulders. "Kramer's dead, and thanks to our running out, all the evidence points to us—"

He stopped short. Stiffened.

"Just why did you do that, Helen? What made you snatch the gun?"

She nestled against him.

"I thought you understood, Frank. Ray needs me, or he wouldn't have called. I had to be free, able to help him. . . ."

Suspicion shadowed Blair's lean face.

"I'm not so sure I do understand, Helen. You say you don't know where Ray is, yet you talk as if he were here with you—"

A trifle too quickly she answered: "He'll find a way to get in touch with me. I know he will."

Blair let it pass.

"My brother's on this case," he said slowly. "That's going to make it tougher. . . ."

"You mean he'll hold it against you that you didn't take his advice? He'll want revenge?"

Blair shook his head.

"No. Al's not that kind. But he's a cop—an honest cop. It's his pride, the thing he lives for."

"Then—"

"We'll get no breaks from him, Helen. Knowing I'm his brother, he'll lean over backwards to pin this job on me. He'll be so afraid he's playing favorites that he'll see me burn first." He shrugged. "We'll just have to play it as it comes, I guess."

He pulled his arm from behind her head. Started the car.

"Where are we going, Frank?"

"Back to town. Our only chance in this mess now is to pin it on the right man before Al nails us."

Her body stiffened, ever so slightly. Blair felt it. He frowned in the darkness. But he said nothing till they were out on the road.

"I wonder where the best place for us to start would be. . . ."

"My apartment—?"

She said it too quickly, and again Blair frowned. But his voice was steady.

"Sounds all right to me. We'll try it."

HELEN HUMPHRIES' apartment was a wedge of second floor in a quiet building on Twelfth, near Franklin. Blair drove by it without stopping. He kept his eyes on the street.

"Any lights?"

Helen shook her head.

"No. It's dark. Nothing looks any different."

He turned off onto Franklin Street. Parked on the hill, next to an alley.

The girl's grey eyes were upon him.

"Why here, Frank?"

He laughed harshly. For the fraction of a second there was fire in his brown eyes.

"I'm crazy enough to be in this deal at all, Helen, but I'm not all crazy. The odds are a hundred to one that apartment's staked out already. There's no need to spit in the cops' eyes by walking in the front way. We'll try it through the alley."

Two darting shadows in the night they were. They merged with those other, blacker shadows that lined the alley. Picked their way in taut, suspenseful silence down the littered track, every crackle of cinders thunderous in their ears.

The building they sought was shaped like an angular horseshoe, built around a narrow slot of court that was a tangled maze of stairways and tiny back porches and clotheslines and garbage

cans.

Still across the alley, Blair paused. His brown eyes narrowed to slits as he searched the area on the other side.

"No lights," he muttered.

"No lights." Helen Humphries squeezed his arm. "We'll be safe there for a little while, dearest. . . ."

"Will we?"

His eyes were still narrowed, his lean face half perturbed, half thoughtful. He turned away. Scanned an overflowing trash barrel at their elbows.

The girl's face mirrored puzzlement.

"What is it, Frank? What are you looking for?"

He fished a patent medicine bottle from the barrel. Frowned at it a moment, then laid it back and probed some more.

This time he came up with an old electric light bulb.

"This'll do."

He held the bulb in his left hand, unobtrusively, half-way out of sight up his coat sleeve. Eased the snub-nosed Mauser from his belt with his right.

"Come on."

He crossed the alley, into another patch of shadows. The girl followed close on his heels, her grey eyes still puzzled.

By inches, they worked their way to the iron stairs leading to Helen's apartment. Then up them, every step an age of torment.

The shadows were even blacker on the landing. Thick, murky, viscous—it was as if the gloom were a palpable entity, a fearsome foe to overcome.

Helen Humphries tiptoed forward. She slipped a key into the lock.

"That's it!" said a voice from the shadows. "Hold it!"

They froze where they stood.

FEET shuffled, and Ed Garrity moved out from behind them. He

held a heavy revolver in his hand. An expression that was half smile, half leer, twisted his sullen, battered face.

"Moe thought you'd be around sooner or later," he said. And, to Blair: "Lay that rod down. Do it careful."

The gun in his hand was steady as the rock of Gibraltar, his dark eyes coldly merciless.

Blair bent forward. Laid down the Mauser.

"Now we'll go in." Garrity jerked his head to Helen, but his eyes did not leave Blair. "Go ahead. Open the door."

The girl turned to obey.

Blair leaned back against the railing of the stair well. His left hand hung over it, behind him. The light bulb plummeted from his fingers. His body tensed.

Pop!

Intrinsically it was not a loud sound, but in that taut moment it echoed like the thunder of a sixteen-inch gun.

Garrity's eyes went wide. His head jerked. His body twisted to a gunman's crouch, the revolver swinging in a sudden arc.

Blair was moving before the sound had died, body arching, fist swinging. His weight was behind it, and his muscle.

The blow exploded on Ed Garrity's jaw with a meaty *thunk!*

Garrity's body went limp. His knees hinged under him, and his mouth sagged open.

Blair caught him before he could hit the floor. His voice was a hoarse whisper.

"Helen! The door!"

In an instant it was open. He stretched Garrity out on the kitchen floor, ran back out for the guns. He returned to a harsh rattle of sound.

"What—?"

"Blackout shades. I never took them down." Helen's voice was muffled. "We can have some lights in a minute."

A moment later light blazed forth. Blair picked up a ball of twine, began lashing Garrity to the pipes under the sink.

"I'll pull the shades in the living room," Helen said. She disappeared through the swinging door.

More lights clicked on.

Blair finished his job with a gag. He walked into the living room. Helen already was seated on the davenport that angled diagonally across the far corner of the room. Her face was flushed with excitement, her red lips smiling.

"Come on, darling. Sit down. . . ."

But Blair stopped short. His eyes were narrowed, his hackles rising.

"What's the matter, Frank?" Helen's voice was suddenly taut, her eyes distended. "What's wrong?"

HE DID not answer. Alarm bells still were ringing in his brain. He whipped the Mauser from his belt, stared slowly around the room.

Nothing.

He moved warily toward the bedroom. Prowled through it, gun in hand. Searched the closet, probed beneath the bed.

Nothing.

He scanned the bathroom's glittering tile, the linen closet, the coat closet, the hall.

Still nothing.

He came back into the living room. The frown still furrowed his forehead.

Helen swept toward him, a queen in scarlet. Her fingers were cool upon his cheek.

"Poor darling! Your nerves. . . ."

She led him across to the davenport, sat down beside him, turned off the

lamp on the little table in the corner behind it.

"Just relax, dearest. . . ." Her voice was a mountain brook purling over mossy stones, her hands gentle as an angel's caress. She smoothed the cushions behind him. Pushed out the coffee table to give his legs more room.

Suddenly, he knew. The jangling note of discord was a mystery no longer. Its key lay there in plain sight before him now.

There was a cigarette butt in the ashtray on the coffee table.

Blair straightened slowly. His brown eyes all at once were very hard.

"Where is he?"

She stared at him, eyes wide, uncomprehending.

"I—I don't understand. . . ."

"Don't give me that guff!" His voice was savage, brutal. "There's a cigarette butt in the ashtray—and you don't smoke!" He reached out, touched it. "The end's still wet—the tip's warm—"

Her laugh was brittle as breaking glass.

"It's mine, Frank. Honestly. Before I left to go to Paul Kramer's—my nerves. . . . I had to have it—"

The lines in Blair's lean face etched deeper. He laughed in her chalk-white face.

"What a fool you must think I am!" He choked on his own bitter mirth. "You're wearing enough lipstick to paint a boxcar, but that butt is clean."

He picked up the butt, thrust it close to her panic-widened eyes. Twisted it about before them.

"See that? A long butt, but no trade mark. It's prison-made. Even the smell gives it away—it stinks to high heaven; that's what must have hit me when I first came in."

All at once, then, the tension seemed to go out of her. She sagged forward,

a sob in her throat.

"Oh, Frank—!" And then: "I might have known you'd guess. He was here. He was supposed to wait for me. . . ."

She raised the pale oval of her face. Her eyes were like grey stars on a night of mist and rain. Her arms reached out to enfold him.

"I'll tell you now, sweetheart. Everything. . . ."

For a moment his back stiffened, but only for a moment. Her body was warm in his arms, her breasts hard against him. Through an eternity he held her tight.

Behind him—a sound!

Blair twisted, craned to see.

FROM behind the davenport, in that angled corner, a man was rising. A tall man, rawboned and rangy as Blair himself, but with close-cropped blondish hair, grey-sprinkled. His face had a fish-belly pallor, plus a tension straight from hell. But it was his clothes that made Blair understand—the coarse dungarees of prison grey, with a cut that could come from only one place. There was a blackjack in his hand.

With an oath, Blair hurled himself backward.

But Helen Humphries' arms were tight about him, her body a clinging millstone to bear him down.

Again Blair cursed. Tried to thrust her away. Snatched for the Mauser in his belt.

But her arms were like tentacles, her scarlet-sheathed body pressed so tight against him that he could not so much as touch the pistol, her voice a gasping kiss of Judas in his ear:

"Ray! Quick! Hit him!"

The man in prison grey bared fang-like teeth in a tiger's snarl. He surged forward. The blackjack rose, came whistling down. It caught Blair hard,

at the base of the skull. He felt himself sagging into a gloomy, pitch-black sea, his arms and legs dead weight, his muscles turned to water.

Through a thousand foggy miles a voice came to him:

"Nice going, Helen, honey. Yokel boy never knew what hit him."

The gently-lapping waves of the pitch-black sea closed over Frank Blair's mind.

CHAPTER IV

AT FIRST it was the constant pounding of the kettledrum inside his head that bothered Frank Blair most. Then, as he slowly became aware of aching joints and cramped muscles, the kettledrum faded to insignificance.

Cautiously, he opened his eyes on blackness—utter, stygian. His mouth, he discovered when he tried to suck in air, was taped shut. More adhesive bound his wrists together in the small of his back. His ankles were taped also, and a couple of additional loops had been used to draw his knees up under his chin so that he could not even kick.

The surface on which he lay was lumpy, rough, uncomfortable. Tedious exploration with his finger tips revealed that he had been dumped atop a heap of women's shoes.

"The bedroom closet!" he muttered, half aloud.

He struggled painfully into a sitting position.

His head went round. Nausea twisted at his stomach. He leaned back against the wall. Prayed he wouldn't pass out again.

Minutes drifted by. Vainly, he tugged and twisted at his bonds.

Then, quite by accident, he brushed against a spring-steel shoetree in one of the shoes. It was uncomfortably sharp.

Forty-five minutes—and half-a-dozen bloody nicks—later, he was free.

He stumbled blindly to his feet, panting and swaying. His head was still pounding, his throat cracking dry. When he pulled off the tape across his mouth, it seemed as if half the flesh of his face were coming with it.

In a spasm of irritation he batted away the thick mass of dresses that hung about him. Clutched the door-knob, clung to it for balance. Turned it, finally, and lurched out into the bedroom.

The bedroom was as dark as the closet. Blair groped his way to the door, opened it.

It was lighter in the hall, with stray beams reflected from the living room, but Blair paid no heed. He stumbled on, into the bathroom. Turned on the cold water in the basin full force, gulped it greedily. Slopped it over his hands, his wrists, his face, his hair.

Finally he straightened. Stared at himself in the mirror above the bowl. A bitter laugh welled in his throat. His face was grey with stubble, lined with strain. The adhesive's irritation had the whole area about his mouth an ugly, uneven red. His eyes were sunk deep in their sockets, their whites a bloodshot network of reddening veins.

Wearily, he raised a quivering, bony hand, ran it through the tangled, matted maze of his ever-unruly hair. Turned and walked slowly away, out of the bathroom, down the hall, into the living room.

He stopped short.

Cecil Johnson sat calmly on the davenport, knees crossed, tweed jacket smoothed, smug face superciliously smiling. He held Blair's Mauser 6.35 in his right hand.

"I wondered how long it would take

you," he chuckled. "They left you done up in quite a tight little package."

Blair ignored him. Walked over to the nearest easy chair, slumped down in it.

"It must have been quite a tussle." Johnson was all mock sympathy. "Left you bushed, didn't it?"

"Go to hell!" Blair grated.

JOHNSON laughed, laid down the black-gripped Mauser on the davenport beside him. He pulled out the silver case, selected a cigarette, snapped flame to its tip with a silver lighter.

"'Here's to woman!'" he murmured. "'Would that we could fall into her arms without falling into her hands.'" His voice was a razor of irony. There was a smirk on his handsome face.

Flames lighted in Blair's brown eyes.

"Damn you!" He started to his feet. His hands were working convulsively. "Is that all you've got to do—sit there, gloating—?"

Johnson picked up the Mauser.

"Let's not let our tempers get out of control, Blair. It might prove fatal." His voice was still mocking, but with a sudden deadly undertone. "This little pistol you took from Sam Yerxa is small caliber, but still lethal."

Head lowered, Blair took another step forward. His lean jaw was tense, his eyes blazing.

"I may take it away from you and knock that smug smirk off your face!" he choked.

"I wouldn't advise trying it." Johnson's eyes were cold contrast to his smiling lips. He balanced the pistol casually in his hand, its muzzle dead on Blair. "I know Mausers, Blair. I own one of this same model myself, and I've done a lot of target practice. I can plant a slug between your eyes before you take another step."

There was a sudden seriousness, a

murderous sincerity, in the debonair bookie's usually flippant voice that made Blair hesitate. Slowly, he subsided back into his chair.

Johnson laid the gun down again.

"As to your complaints of my gloating," he went on smoothly, as if nothing had happened, "I assure you it's merely an avocation. I really have important business here. Gloating simply helps to pass the time."

The hint of a frown touched Blair's face. His brown eyes were puzzled.

"Important business. . . .?"

"With Ray Humphries. A little matter of seventy thousand dollars."

Blair's frown grew.

"Are you crazy? Helen and Ray Humphries are the ones that tied me up. They must have left here hours ago—"

"I know." Johnson nodded, blew a smoke ring. "I watched them go."

"Then—?"

"I think they'll be back." Johnson's smug smile radiated self-confidence. "In fact, I can practically guarantee it."

Blair studied him thoughtfully.

"I don't get it."

Johnson laughed.

"I didn't expect you to, my dear Mister Blair. But you soon will."

Blair was still thoughtful.

"There must be an angle I don't know about." He stopped short, leaned forward. "Tell me one thing, Johnson. Just what is the score on this seventy grand everyone keeps talking about? Where did it come from? Why's everyone so sure Ray Humphries has got it?"

FOR an instant bewilderment flicked over Cecil Johnson's face. Then, as quickly as it had come, it was gone, and he lay back on the davenport, roaring with real laughter.

"You mean Helen didn't tell you about it?" he gasped. "That you've been so addled with that petal-shedding

chrysanthemum's face and figure that you went into this thing blindfolded? You set yourself up as target in a shooting gallery without even knowing what the prize was?"

Again he rocked with laughter.

Blair's face was darkly crimson, his voice thick.

"Have your fun!" he grated.

Johnson sobered.

"Really, Blair, I'm sorry. I didn't realize that your brother had *all* the brains in the Blair family." He crushed out his cigarette. "It really is quite a story—goes back nearly five years. It begins in Corwin."

"Corwin?" It was Blair's turn to look bewildered.

"Never heard of it, eh?" Johnson lighted another cigarette. "I'm not surprised. Corwin is a little town upstate. Helen and Ray Humphries and I all lived there originally. I was a teller in the local bank. So was Ray Humphries."

"The bank the seventy grand came from?"

Johnson nodded.

"Precisely."

"What happened?"

"The usual thing—a robbery. Four armed thugs marched into the bank and cleaned the vault. Probably no one ever would have known Ray Humphries was their accomplice if it hadn't been for Anderson."

"Anderson?"

"The cashier. He pulled a gun as the gang was leaving. Shot one of them in the back."

Blair frowned.

"How does that tie up with Ray Humphries?"

Cecil Johnson drew his cigarette's smoke deep into his lungs.

"Humphries always was a nervous type," he explained. "I'm afraid the excitement, and Anderson's shooting,

was too much for him. He pulled his own gun, shot Anderson dead, and ran out of the bank carrying the suitcaseful of cash the dead gangster had dropped."

Blair whistled.

"And they got away with it?"

"Hardly." Johnson chuckled reminiscently. "Our local police chief always had worried about the possibility of a bank robbery, so he'd primed half-a-dozen neighborhood businessmen always to keep their deer rifles handy. When the alarm began ringing—Anderson must have stepped on the button—they swarmed out of their stores and started shooting. They turned the bandits' car into a sieve. Two robbers were killed outright, and the third died before sundown. Humphries was badly wounded, too, but he recovered in time to stand trial."

THERE was a question on Blair's lean face.

"Didn't Humphries know about these volunteer sharpshooters the police had planted around the bank?" he demanded.

Johnson nodded.

"He must have," he confessed slowly.

"In fact, that was one of the big puzzles about the whole thing. The only answer we could figure out was that he knew all the men involved, and thought they'd be too confused and excited to do any shooting."

"Didn't he explain it when they caught him?"

"No." Johnson shook his head, puffed some more at his cigarette. "He pleaded innocent. Denied the whole thing. Insisted that the hold-up men forced him to go along as a hostage."

"But they convicted him?"

"Of course. Old Tom Oglethorpe, the bank guard, was knocked down when the gang came in, but he saw the

whole thing. When Anderson started shooting, Humphries came out of his cage and shot down Anderson. Then he ran for the door. Half the town saw him run for the getaway car with the suitcase in his hand."

"How far did they get?"

Johnson laughed.

"Barely three miles. Then the driver—he was the wounded man who died—collapsed completely. Humphries was found half a block from the car, unconscious, the suitcase still in his hand."

"And the seventy grand?"

"Gone. The negotiable bonds were still in the suitcase, and the small bills from the tellers' cages. But the real money—the packaged cash from the vault—had disappeared."

"But how—?"

Johnson leaned forward, a lilt of excitement in his voice.

"That holdup car was lost for almost ten minutes after the shooting, Blair. Somehow, somewhere, during that time, Ray Humphries managed to cache the money. The police hunted everywhere—the vacant lots, the sewers, the car itself—but not a nickel of it ever was found!"

Blair rubbed one lean cheek. His brown eyes were thoughtful.

"What makes you so sure Humphries ever got that cash, Johnson?" he asked.

The bookie's handsome face was puzzled.

"You mean—?"

"If everything except that packaged cash was recovered, what makes you so sure it ever left the bank in that suitcase?" Blair leaned back, eyes narrowed to bloodshot slits. "Maybe somebody else stole it, Johnson—you, for instance! Maybe when that robbery came along it looked like a swell chance—"

The puzzlement vanished from Cecil Johnson's face.

Again he rocked with laughter.

"Blair, you're wonderful! I swear you are! Your feeble mind is about as wandering and circuitous as the police's."

Blair was still watching him.

"You haven't answered my question yet, Johnson!" he said.

Johnson's mirth cut short.

"You arrant ass!" he sneered, lip curling. "Are even you fool enough to imagine the police didn't think of that possibility?" He crushed out his cigarette. "By sheer coincidence, however, the bank had been examined only the day before the robbery, so the amount of cash on hand was known to the penny. Within an hour after the suitcase was recovered, and the seventy-thousand-dollar loss discovered, every one of us was being searched from the skin out. Our finances were investigated—our personal lives probed—"

"But no dice?"

Johnson subsided.

"No. None."

Blair eyed him speculatively.

"So what happens now?" he probed.

"Now?" Johnson had recovered his poise. He smoothed his narrow mustache, one eyebrow raised. "Isn't it rather obvious, even to you, Blair? My plans call for—shall we be euphemistic?—a reapportionment of Mister Humphries' ill-gotten wealth. Lars, my assistant, perhaps will get twenty-five per cent; I shall have seventy-five, or maybe all."

"And Moe Evans?"

"Moe Evans is a blundering fool, like yourself. In the early stages his contacts inside the prison were valuable. Now he's useless. He gets nothing."

A WAVE of revulsion swept over Frank Blair.

"You've got it all figured out, haven't you, Johnson?" he raked. There was cold loathing in his voice. "You'll double cross 'em, one and all, friends and enemies alike."

"Friends?" Johnson's voice was a stinging scourge of scorn, his eyes blazing, his whole body taut, intense. "Do you call such scum my friends?" His left hand gripped the davenport's arm till the knuckles stood out white beneath the skin. He was trembling. "I haven't any friends, Blair. Not one! That robbery washed me up! Till then, I was a normal human being, living a normal life. Now look at me!"

Blair said nothing. Finally, after a moment of quivering, pregnant silence, Johnson rushed on.

"There were four of us in the bank the morning of that hold-up, Blair. Anderson was killed, and Humphries sent to prison. That left Tom Oglethorpe, the guard, and me. Because that seventy thousand was missing, the police cross-examined us and browbeat us and bullied us. For months we were shadowed everyplace we went. Finally we couldn't stand it any longer. Oglethorpe retired and came here to live with his children. I just quit." He laughed harshly. "From bank teller to book-maker in one jump, Blair. That's how I travelled."

He leaned forward, burning, intense.

"Do you wonder I intend to get that seventy thousand, Blair? Can't even your thick skull absorb the reason?" He was still trembling, breathing hard. "For months I've planned it—helping Helen Humphries get a job at the Hide-away; getting Moe Evans to use his prison contacts to bring pressure on Ray; lining up Lars for the strongarm work." Again he laughed. Slowly, some of the tension was beginning to drain out of him. "Now it's coming through. Fear for Helen made Ray

Humphries lose his head, go over the wall. He'll come here, and I'll put the pressure on him. He won't have a chance to hold out!"

Blair studied the debonair book-maker.

"And . . . afterwards?"

Johnson's smug smile was almost normal. He shrugged.

"I can afford to be generous. I shan't bother to turn Ray over to the police. If he and Helen survive, they can go their way in peace."

It was an endless moment. Blair's voice was suddenly low, half broken.

"You think she'll go with him?"

"Of course." Johnson's smirk was a sadistic masterpiece. "Surely you have no more illusions about that cold-blooded little harpie? Hasn't she proved even to your satisfaction that she'll stick to her husband, against you?"

"Her husband!" Blair tried to hold himself in check, to fight the panic from his voice. "Ray Humphries is her brother, not her husband."

THE smirk on Cecil Johnson's face was growing, twisting, contorting. It exploded in a ribald, riotous guffaw.

"You fool!" he choked between spasms of laughter. "You utter, absolute fool! Not even a cop's brother should be so stupid!"

Red rage was like a veil over Frank Blair's eyes. He surged to his feet, lunged forward.

The Mauser seemed to leap into Johnson's hand. The mirth dropped away from him like a mummer's mask. His eyes were globules of ice.

"Don't press me, Blair!" he rapped. "Because I may be able to use you, I've treated you as if you were human. But I assure you I'll see you dead before I'll let my plans be broken!"

For an instant Blair hung there,

poised to strike, heedless of Johnson, the gun, death itself—. But the red rage was clearing. Muttering, he backed away.

From the back landing came the faint whisper of footsteps.

Johnson jerked alert.

Knuckles beat a peculiar, light tattoo on the back door.

The ex-bank teller relaxed.

"We have visitors!" he chuckled.

"I don't get it."

Blair's lean face mirrored suspicion.

"You will."

The swinging door from the kitchen pushed in, upon them.

Ray Humphries stood framed in the opening. He was breathing hard, through his mouth. One cheek lay open, raked wide by a long, ugly gash. Blood had spilled from it to dye great streaks of his grey prison shirt a crusty rust-brown. His close-clipped blondish hair was matted, awry.

Behind him loomed the gaunt stranger from the Hideaway Club's bar, the man called Lars. Bared teeth joined with hollow cheeks in a ghastly death's-head grin, but the blue eyes were still chipped glacial ice. The gun no longer rested in its shoulder holster; Lars held it in his right hand, close to Humphries' back.

Through an eternity, it seemed, Ray Humphries swayed there, hands working, lips atremble. He did not so much as glance at Blair. He had eyes only for Cecil Johnson—eyes that were living, boiling pools of hate.

"Johnson!"

He pronounced the name as if it were a death sentence. Swayed forward drunkenly as he said it. Swayed forward—and lunged!

BY INSTINCT, rather than volition,

Frank Blair's muscles acted, carried him aside, out of the way of that

mad charge.

Not so Johnson.

Self-confidence, arrogance, contempt—superbly they blended in his gesture.

He did not so much as raise the Mauser. Brought up, instead, his silver lighter. Snapped flame to a cigarette between his lips.

But behind Humphries the gunman, Lars, leaped forward, teeth bared, a panther hurtling on its prey. His heavy gun slashed out and down. Caught the convict on the back of the head before he was half across the floor.

Momentum carried Humphries forward, but he was falling as he came. He landed, a crumpled heap, at Cecil Johnson's feet.

Johnson tucked away the silver lighter. His lips twisted in their ever-supercilious smile.

"You see?" His hand flicked out toward the fallen man in an indolent little gesture. "This is why I don't fool around with Moe Evans and the incompetent trash who work for him. A man like Lars is worth a dozen of them."

He turned to the gunman.

"How did it go, Lars?"

The gaunt man shook his head.

"Only fair, chum. Only fair." He licked his thin lips. "This lamster and his twist split up. I knew he was the one you were hot for, so I let her go."

Momentarily the shadow of a frown crossed Johnson's face. As quickly vanished.

"No matter. These things never go quite according to plan in the details."

He turned, prodded the prostrate Humphries with his foot, first gently, then harder.

"Time to wake up, Ray."

Slowly, painfully, the grey-garbed convict pulled himself to a sitting position.

Johnson leaned forward.

"Where is it, Ray?"

The fugitive glared up at him from bloodshot eyes.

"Go to hell."

"The seventy thousand you looted from the Corwin Bank, Ray. Where is it?"

"Go to hell."

"I want a better answer than that, Ray. I want to know where the money is."

"Go to hell."

LARS leaned forward, gaunt face malevolent.

"Let me ask the questions!" he grated through bared, clenched teeth. "I'll get better answers!"

Johnson shook his head. His face was still relaxed, smiling.

"No, thanks, Lars. I don't think that will be necessary."

He turned back to Humphries.

"Let's look at this sensibly, Ray. Right now you're in a rather unpleasant spot, you know." He paused, puffed at his cigarette while the thought sank in. "If I say the word you'll never leave here alive."

Humphries said nothing.

"On the other hand, if you cooperate, we may be able to make this into a good thing for all concerned. I'll be recompensed a bit for the trouble I've suffered over the years. You'll have enough to get out of the country. The odds are against your ever being hunted down and extradited."

Still no answer.

"Do you deny knowing where that money is, Ray?"

"Of course I deny it!" Ray Humphries' trembling voice crawled with repressed fury. "I'm not guilty of anything. I never saw a nickel of that dough. I didn't even know it was gone till I came to in the hospital with half the dicks in the state working me over." His eyes were bright with smouldering

fire. "As if you didn't know! You probably got it yourself!"

Johnson laughed softly, knocked ash from his cigarette.

"I'm afraid your emotions are getting the better part of your judgment, Ray. I assure you I wouldn't be sitting here trying to pry information out of you if I already knew where that money was." He ground out his cigarette in the ashtray on the coffee table. Leaned forward once more. "Let's try it again: Where's that money?"

A guttural voice said: "That's what I want to know, Johnson."

As one man, they whirled—Johnson, Lars, Blair, Humphries.

Gun in hand, fat face cold and hard as greasy brass, Moe Evans stood in the doorway.

CHAPTER V

EVEN as he spoke, Evans was moving into the room. His eyes were gleaming obsidian slits deep in the greasy folds of his fat face, the big revolver in his hand an unwavering lethal menace. Ed Garrity and Sam Yerxa crowded through the door behind him.

Lars, the gunman, started to his feet. His right hand flashed toward his shoulder holster.

Ed Garrity's mouth twisted in a sullen snarl. He leaped across the threshold, out from behind Moe Evans, swinging up his own weapon as he came. It was a double-barreled shotgun, with the stock sawed off at the pistol grip and the barrels cut down to less than a foot in length.

Lars' hand stopped in mid-flight. He stopped dead in his tracks, as if paralyzed.

Moe Evans laughed harshly, jerked the cigar from between his yellowing teeth, spat full on the floor.

"That stopped 'em!" He grinned ferociously at Garrity. "Nothing like a shotgun, eh, Ed?"

Garrity's battered face did not change. His dark eyes still focused, unwinking, on the men before him.

"Yeah." He stalked forward, cat-footed, rammed the shotgun's barrels hard against Lars' stomach. Reached across, with his left hand, and took the gunman's weapon from its holster. Weighed it, for a moment, in his palm. Then, so fast that the eye could hardly follow, the hand came up. Slapped the gun with all his strength against Lars' head.

A coughing, choking cry welled and died in the gaunt man's throat. His knees hinged under him. He crumpled to the floor.

Garrity's laugh was a hoarse, animal snarl. Again he stalked forward, to Frank Blair.

"You're quite a guy, Blair. You tied me up good. I'd still be there if some of the threading on them pipes wasn't burred."

Blair said nothing. His stomach was drawn into a tight knot of tension, his every muscle taut and strained.

Again Garrity's left hand lashed out.

Blair tried to dodge, fall back, ride with the blow.

He was too slow. The gun caught him just below the ear. The strength drained from him. He felt himself pitching forward, onto his face. The inside of his head was exploding into a ringing jangle of agony.

"That's enough, Ed!" Moe Evans rapped. And then, to Cecil Johnson. "All right. Now I'm taking over. A double cross can work two ways."

"Don't be foolish, Moe." Johnson's voice was still coolly insolent. "We're in this thing together, even if minor differences do occasionally arise."

He started to his feet.

"Siddown, you goddamn' phoney!" Unbelievably agile for all his weight, the fat racketeer leaped forward. His foot lashed out in a savage kick. Caught Johnson square in the belly, sent him reeling backward into his seat again, retching and gasping.

Yellow teeth still bared, Evans whirled on Ray Humphries.

"All right, leadhead! Where's that dough?"

"Go to hell."

Evans' hand shot out. Slapped Humphries savagely on both sides of the face.

"That's not the answer, punk!"

He turned to his aides.

"This loogan wants to play tough. Let him! We'll see how tough he is! Go get some water boiling on that stove in the kitchen!"

He turned again. Kicked Lars hard in the side. Slapped viciously at Johnson.

"You two! Get Humphries on his feet. Tie him in a chair."

Again his foot lashed out, this time at Blair.

"You!" Get that gooseneck lamp over in the corner. Rig it to shine in the punk's eyes. We'll see how tough he is!"

Head still spinning, Blair stumbled to his feet. Already Lars and Johnson were dragging Humphries into a chair.

BLAIR choked back the nausea that tugged at his stomach. He tottered toward the lamp, straightened its neck so that when turned on the full glare would hit Ray Humphries in the face.

"Hurry up that water!" Moe Evans was ranting. "We'll see—"

Blair's eyes were suddenly narrow, canny. His fingers gripped the lamp's bulb, loosened it in the socket.

"Have to have another bulb, Evans." Desperately, Blair tried to keep his

voice steady. "This one's burned out."

He snapped on the switch to demonstrate.

"Well, get one!" Evan's voice was a lash of fury and contempt. "Or is that too big a job for you?"

Blair turned back to the lamp, took the bulb completely out of the socket. Turned, pretending to search the room's fixtures for another. His right hand slipped into his pocket. Came out again with a penny.

"Hurry up!" Moe Evans flayed. "This ain't an all-night job."

Blair bent over the lamp, shielded it with his body. His rawboned frame was stiff with tension, his forehead wet with chill sweat.

His trembling hand came up. Dropped the penny into the lamp's socket.

There was a hiss, a crackle, a sudden burst of blue flame.

The lights blacked out.

For the fraction of a second the apartment was silent. Then it echoed, re-echoed, with a burst of shouts and curses.

Blair hurled himself to the floor, rolled toward the hall door.

Across the pitch-black room Sam Yerxa said uncertainly: "I got a light."

A match flamed between his fingers.

From the darkness to Blair's right, a gun roared—again—again—again. In the orange glare of the muzzle-blast he could see Lars' pale, hate-contorted face as he squeezed the trigger.

Sam Yerxa crashed back against the wall, his plaintive voice echoing in a wild scream.

And on the echo, from somewhere in the blackness, Johnson's voice: "Good shooting, Lars! We'll show the bastards!"

Someone blazed away at the sound of his voice, two fast shots.

Moe Evans screamed like an animal

in pain.

"Stop shooting, you fools! You'll kill us all!"

Blair's fumbling fingers closed on the doorknob, whipped the portal open. He was through it, into the hall, in a split second. Then away in a mad dash, plummeting down stairs, lunging out of the building, losing himself in the shadows.

The night was full of the sound of windows going up, of voices rising—excited, hysterical.

BLAIR sprinted down Franklin Street to his car. Keys in hand, he scrambled in. Stepped on the starter. Roared off into the night.

A figure rose behind him from the back seat's blackness—a figure tall and rawboned and rangy as his own, but with hair cut short, and wearing prison dungarees. A pistol barrel pressed into the back of his neck.

"I thought you'd be along," Ray Humphries said. "You had the car keys, so I had to chance it. That place is going to be crawling with law in another minute or so."

Blair's body stiffened, but his voice was toneless.

"Where do you want to go?"

"Out Euclid. There's a little unfinished business to attend to there."

Euclid Street was old, elm-shaded. The houses were mostly two-story family dwellings. The one Humphries pointed out was like that—dirty buff, with an ugly, scowling pillared porch in front.

Blair pulled to the curb, opened the door.

"O. K."

Humphries shook stubbled head.

"You're coming too, mister."

Blair turned to face the convict. His lean, haggard face was somber, his bloodshot brown eyes hard with de-

termination.

"No."

One word, but it had the dull finality of a leaden hammer smashing a chip of glass to atoms.

Ray Humphries' head seemed to sink down between his shoulders. His eyes were like coals, and the gash in his cheek gave his whole face a feral twist. He rammed his gun hard up under Blair's chin.

"I said you were. You think I'd let you run loose to call down the cops on me?"

Blair sat very still.

"Your wife, or sister, or whatever-the-hell-she-is, got me into this mess," he said tonelessly. "For her I broke with my own brother . . . tangled with Johnson and Moe Evans . . . mixed in murder and worse. I didn't mind. I figured she was worth it."

He sucked in a deep breath. The bitter lines of his face etched deeper. He went on:

"Only that wasn't enough for her. She couldn't even let me go on playing the happy sucker." A tremor shook him in spite of all his efforts at control. "Lord, how she must have laughed! Frank Blair, the simple-minded Rover Boy! The guy she only had to rub herself against to make him lie down so you could hit him!"

He laughed, but it had the taste of vinegar and gall.

"Get going!" said Ray Humphries. He prodded the gun harder under Blair's chin.

"No." Blair's eyes were bleak as an arctic night. "I'm through playing sap. From here on out, I'm looking after myself, first and last. No more pulling other people's chestnuts out of the fire. And if anyone gets in my way—"—his lips quirked in an icy, mirthless smile—"—blood on the moon, Humphries. Just like Helen's song says.

Blood on the moon!"

HUMPHRIES moved the pistol barrel gently back and forth. Blair could feel the front sight raking the soft skin beneath his chin.

"You don't really think you can pull out now, do you, Blair?" the convict rasped. "Not after all this?" There was a mad gleam in his eyes, unstable laughter welling in his throat. "Try to back down, Blair! Just try it! Helen and I'll swear your life away—if you live to trial!" He shook his head. "No, Blair, you're coming along now!"

Blair studied him. Caught the maniacal glint.

At last:

"All right. What are we here for?"

The fugitive hunched forward.

"Tom Oglethorpe lives here." His voice trembled with fury. "He put me in the pen, Blair. He swore he saw me shoot Anderson, the cashier!"

"So?"

"So he lied, damn him, he lied!" Humphries was almost sobbing. "I didn't kill Anderson! He couldn't have seen me! Those hoodlums were dragging me out of the bank, making me carry their suitcase full of loot, while he was still sprawling on the floor, knocked silly, not knowing whether he was in the bank or Timbuctoo!"

"That's past history," said Blair. "What are you going to do tonight?"

"I'm going to make him tell the truth! I'll kill him if he doesn't! He knows something—Paul Kramer said so the last time he saw me—"

"Kramer?" A sudden tension gripped him. "When did you see him?"

"A month ago, at the prison. He was excited—said he had a new idea. He'd been around, interviewing Oglethorpe, Johnson, the police, everyone—"

"What about tonight? What did he

say then?"

Humphries stopped short. He laughed harshly.

"So that's it! You're trying to pump me, trying to get me to admit I saw him and killed him!"

He rammed the pistol against Blair's throat.

"Come on! We're going in now!"

Blair stumbled from the car. He clung to the door, swaying a little.

"That last wallop I got . . ." he muttered half aloud. "My head keeps spinning. . ."

Humphries was beside him, prodding.

"Go on. You first."

Blair straightened, turned toward the house.

"What after this, Humphries?" His eyes were cold, narrowed. "Where do we go then?"

The convict smiled. It was like a hungry tiger licking his chops.

"Then we'll see Dave Randolph," he said softly. "Dave was prosecutor at my trial. I think he knows a few things too. He's here for the bar association convention, staying at the State. Helen's there now, keeping him on ice for us."

"But—"

Again the prodding gun.

"Get moving!"

THEY went up the walk toward the porch. Blair was swaying a little.

"That last wallop . . ." he muttered again. He clutched at the porch steps' newel post for support, tottering. His knees gave under him. He started to slump to the ground.

Ray Humphries jumped forward to catch him. Wrestled with him, gripping him under the arms.

Blair's right knee drove up into the convict's crotch in a sledge-hammer blow. His head snapped back under Humphries' chin with a butting crack

of contact like a breaking branch.

Humphries' scream would have torn the nerves of a slaughter-house killer. He pitched to the ground, lay writhing.

Blair snatched up his gun. It was the same snub-nosed, crack-gripped Mauser 6.35 he had taken from Sam Yerxa hours earlier.

The house door opened. A man peered blearily out.

"Wh'us up?" His voice was high, nasal.

For an instant Blair hesitated. Then: "You Tom Oglethorpe?"

The man in the doorway shook his head.

"Uh-uh. He's my pa. He's upstairs asleep."

Blair took a deep breath.

"This man's an escaped convict." He jerked his head toward Humphries. "I believe your father testified at his trial. We think he was prowling around here, looking for a chance to get revenge. If it wouldn't be too much trouble for your father to identify him—"

The man in the doorway was bleary no longer.

"Must be Ray Humphries, huh? Bring him in. I'll wake pa."

Together they climbed the stairs to the second floor, Blair dragging Humphries bodily behind him.

Tom Oglethorpe proved to be a bald, red-faced, bulbously fat man in an old-fashioned nightshirt. He came awake noisily and with difficulty.

"Eh? Eh? What is all this?" He was puffing like a whale. He fumbled at a night stand beside the bed. "Who are these people, son? You know I can't see a thing without my glasses—"

"Here they are, Pa." Oglethorpe's son handed over a pair of ancient, steel-rimmed spectacles. "Ray Humphries escaped. They want you to tell 'em if this is him."

The old man finally got the glasses adjusted.

"Eh? Sure, that's Ray. Mighty rough customer." He peered up at Blair. "Who're you?"

"I'm one of the men hunting Humphries." Blair sat down on the edge of Oglethorpe's bed. "You were the one who identified him at the original trial, aren't you?"

"Sure, that's right." The old man swelled visibly. "Forty years, I was guard at the Corwin Bank. Then these fellas come in. Rough bunch, too. Knocked me down, broke my glasses—"

Blair went taut.

"—rushed off into the vault. Then Anderson shot one of 'em. Humphries, here, come runnin' out an' shot Anderson—"

BLAIR gripped the old man's arm. His lean face was aglow with excitement.

"How'd you know it was Humphries?"

"Eh? How'd I know?" Oglethorpe was indignant. His face grew red. "I saw him, didn't I?"

Blair's voice cut like a knife.

"You said those thugs knocked you down and broke your glasses. Tonight, right here, you said you couldn't see a thing without them. So how'd you pick out Ray Humphries?"

The old man snorted.

"Y' sound like a lawyer!" he ranted belligerently. "Don't you think I know what I'm talking about? You're as bad as them lawyers at the trial."

"But how'd you pick him out?"

"By his coat, natcherly." The old man's indignation was increasing by leaps and bounds. "Just 'cause I can't see little things, an' faces, so good don't mean I can't pick somebody out. Ray Humphries always wore a black alpaca coat in the bank."

Blair stared at him in stunned, unbelieving silence.

"You mean . . . you mean you testified a man into prison because he wore a black coat?"

"It ain't as bad as it sounds, mister," Oglethorpe's son defended. "Nobody never thought about pa's glasses bein' broke while the trial was goin' on, but I can see how it hits you. Only everybody in Corwin knew that black coat of Ray's. . . ."

"But somebody else could have been wearing it!" Blair burst out. "Or maybe it was just an ordinary dark coat—"

"Uh-uh. Oglethorpe's son shook his head. "First place, Pa wasn't the only one saw Humphries. Half the town watched him run out of that bank with the money. He was wearin' his coat. An' he dropped his gun—the one he always kept in his cage—there in the bank. The state police had an expert that said it was the one that shot Anderson."

A frown furrowed Blair's forehead.

"Somebody else might have—"

"Who?" exploded Tom Oglethorpe from the bed. "Just tell me that, young fella! Who was there to wear a coat, or shoot a gun, or anything else?"

"Well—"

"Nobody, that's who!" The old man was puffing, his face redder than ever, his bald pate gleaming. "There wasn't nobody there but me an' Anderson an' Humphries an' Johnson!"

Blair jumped.

"Johnson! Where was he?"

Both Oglethorpes rocked with sudden laughter.

"You'd know where he was if you'd had to pull him out of his cage, mister!" the oldster said finally. "He was hidin' like a scared rabbit. When the trial come up, he claimed he'd never even stuck his nose out. He didn't even

testify."

"But he could have—"

"Look, mister," the younger Oglethorpe interrupted nasally. "I ain't tryin' to tell you your business, but you just ain't makin' sense. *Why* would Johnson—or anyone else but Humphries—want to shoot Anderson? I can see him stealin' the money, maybe—but why shoot anybody? It just don't make sense."

"Besides," his father broke in, "the money's gone. If Johnson had took it, it'd've turned up. Them police searched every inch of that bank. Only one had a chance to get away with it was Humphries, an'—"

DOWNSTAIRS, a doorbell rang.

"Reckon I better go," the younger Oglethorpe apologized. "My wife ain't dressed fit." He shuffled out of the room.

Blair's face was a study in puzzlement.

"There wasn't anyone else in the bank while the holdup was going on? Not anyone?"

Old Tom Oglethorpe snorted his disgust. He flopped heavily about in his bed.

"I told you—"

"But are you sure?" Blair badgered him. "Couldn't there have been—"

"Look, young fella!" Old Oglethorpe was bellicose, scowling. "The only other person in that whole bank all durin' the holdup was Dave Randolph, the county prosecutor. He was off in the safety deposit room lookin' over some papers—didn't even know about the holdup till afterwards. He was locked in all the time, an' he didn't come out, an' he's such a little squidgeon of a fella that even my poor eyes couldn't of mixed him up with Ray Humphries!"

"Then—"

"Maybe you'd like to say it was me shot Anderson an' got all that money!" The old man was glaring and puffing, bald pate angrily aglitter. "You act just like them state police did after the robbery. Houndin' me, pesterin' me, followin' me, till I finally got sick of it an' retired. If it warn't for my boy—"

It was sharp, that sound that cut in upon them. Like an automobile back-firing, or a not-too-large firecracker going off. At first Blair thought it was a car in the street outside. Three times it came, echoing and re-echoing through the open window.

A fit of coughing seemed to convulse old Tom Oglethorpe. He heaved spasmodically in the bed, clutching at his throat. His red face wore a startled look.

Then, eyes open, staring, he slumped sidewise. His hand fell away from his throat. Blood rilled from where the hand had been, three red rivulets coursing down to dye his sleazy cotton night-shirt crimson.

Not till then did Frank Blair realize what was happening. He leaped to his feet, lunged for the window. The Mauser was in his hand.

The window opened onto the porch roof. A shadowy, unidentifiable figure was disappearing over the edge.

Blair let go three quick shots, straddled the windowsill.

Footsteps were pounding on the stairs. The house echoed with bellowing voices.

"Stop him!" young Oglethorpe shrilled nasally. "He's killed pa!"

Blair whirled.

A hurtling body knocked him sprawling. It was Ray Humphries. He slid for the porch's edge. Vanished over the side.

A heavy gun roared in the bedroom, kicked up dust and splinters from the porch roof's shingles.

Blair jerked back. He glimpsed a solid, savage figure — a swart face, strain-molded, beneath a dark snap-brim hat. Caught the harsh cacophony of a dread familiar voice.

"It's Humphries! My kid brother! Get 'em!"

Blair hurled himself toward the roof's edge. Snatched at it as he went over, barely enough to break his fall. Stumbled off, dodging and twisting, in one mad dash. A leaden hail sang a death song in his wake.

He stopped, finally, at Kemper Street, to crouch in the shadows and wait for a bus. He was staggering with weariness, and his clothes were in rags, and his face was puffed and battered as a losing fighter's at the end of a hard twelfth round.

But there was a terrible cold intensity in his red-rimmed brown eyes. His lean face was chiseled in granite lines as he checked his Mauser automatic's magazine.

When a late-cruising cab came by, he flagged it down.

Bone-weary, he sank back in the seat. But his voice was grim menace, incarnate, as he directed the driver:

"Make it the State Hotel, friend, and quick! I've got a date with a lady!"

CHAPTER VI

THE State's lobby was a forest of marble pillars, the desk an ornate mahogany sanctum for smugly urbane dignitaries masquerading as clerks.

Blair went in the side entrance.

An alcove hid a row of house phones. By using one of them, Blair learned—without revealing his own bedraggled condition—that David Randolph occupied room 819.

Two minutes later he was knocking on 819's door.

It opened a grudging six inches. An

aging, irascible-looking little ferret of a man glared out at Blair. Despite the hour, the man was fully dressed save for hat and coat. He even wore a vest, though unbuttoned.

"Well?" he snapped testily.

Blair stared coldly back at him.

"I'm looking for a young lady—a Miss Helen Humphries. I was told I'd find her in this room."

"Well, she's not here." The occupant's voice was crusty as his face. "My name's Dave Randolph. This is my room."

He started to slam the door shut.

Blair's foot got in the way. He stiff-armed the door wide. The little man reeled wildly backward, off balance and half falling.

Ignoring him, Blair strode to the bathroom. It was empty. So was the closet, the space beneath the bed.

Bristling, Randolph darted toward the phone.

Blair cut him off.

The little man was quivering. His voice trembled with rage.

"What d'you want, young man? What d'you mean, forcing your way in here—"

"I'm after information." Blair spoke curtly. "Four or five years ago you prosecuted a man named Ray Humphries for murder and bank robbery. Tonight that man went over the state prison wall. He and the girl, this Helen Humphries, are hunting for you. The girl was supposed to be 'keeping Randolph on ice' right now."

The little man shifted uneasily. His pinched, sharp-featured face wore a frown.

"I remember the case. Humphries swore vengeance on all of us." He hesitated. "He's out now, you say?"

Blair nodded.

Randolph paced the floor in short, erratic steps.

"Been out all evening," he explained. "I'm here for the bar association convention. Tonight some of us got together for a little poker game."

Blair remained silent.

The little man brought his pacing to a halt. Tension was accentuating the sharpness of his features, stamping worry in every line.

"We better see Judge Whitney. He's here too, just down the hall. Humphries swore he'd get him, too."

"Good enough. Let's go."

Whitney had room 831. Blair and Randolph joined in beating a tattoo on his door.

No answer.

Anxiety crept into Randolph's frown.

"He should be in," he muttered. "He came back with me."

Again they knocked.

No answer.

Blair glanced up at the transom. It was open.

"I'm going in," he said. He perched precariously on the doorknob. Squirmed on up and through.

IT WAS dark in the room. Blair fumbled for the light switch, snapped it on.

The room was empty.

Blair opened the door, admitted Randolph.

"You're sure the judge came back when you did?" he demanded. "He didn't stop off downstairs, or anything?"

The little man shook his head.

"No. I saw him right to this door." He was stubbornly insistent.

Blair frowned.

"I better look around."

He tried the closet. It was empty.

He moved on to the bathroom. Stopped short.

There was a man in the bathroom, a big man, still fully dressed, with a bushy

mane of snow-white hair. He lay on his face on the tile floor, spread-eagled. A puddle of blood had seeped from beneath his body.

In spite of himself, Blair tottered. But it was not the man, nor the sight of death, that gripped him.

Dave Randolph pushed past him, craning to see. Stopped short, as Blair had done before him.

"He's dead! The judge is dead!" The little man's voice was a hoarse, panic-ridden whisper.

Blair gritted his teeth, fought back his own emotions. He gripped the other's thin shoulders.

"Hold it, Randolph! Don't blow your top!"

But now the little man was following Blair's gaze, seeing what Blair saw. He jerked free, tugged at the thing clenched in Judge Whitney's clammy hand, red as the blood that seeped from beneath the body.

"A corsage!" he exclaimed. "I wonder . . ."

"Then don't." Frank Blair's voice was harsh, his face stony. "It's Helen Humphries! I gave it to her myself . . . earlier." In spite of all he could do, his voice broke.

Randolph stared at him, eyes curious.

"You gave it to her?"

"Yes." Blair's shoulders were sagging, his stomach a gnawing pain in his middle. He reached out. "Let's have it."

As if on springs, the other leaped away.

"No, you don't!" he cried. His pinched features were aglow with excitement. "The police are the only ones who'll get this corsage!"

"Don't be a damn' fool!" Blair started forward.

THE little man's hand flashed down to his vest pocket. Jerked up again,

clutching a tiny gun with a borer that seemed as big as a cannon's.

"Stand back!" His voice was like a whipcrack, his sharp face taut. "This derringer of Judge Whitney's will blow a man apart at ten feet!"

Blair halted. His face was working convulsively.

"You didn't think I was going along with you on all this, did you?" Randolph taunted. "I haven't been a prosecutor all these years for nothing! I came with you just so I could get a weapon. Now you'll stay here while I call the police!"

He picked up the phone.

Blair's hands were sweaty. He rubbed them against the sides of his trousers. His red-rimmed brown eyes were focused on the gun.

"Operator?" the little man was saying. "This is Room 831. Please get some police up here at once. I have a suspicious prowler."

Blair edged forward.

Randolph hung up the phone.

"Oh, no, you don't!" he cried again. He backed away, till his spindling frame leaned against the hall door. The derringer in his hand stabbed at Blair. "One step closer, sir, and I'll blow you apart!"

Blair started to turn away.

"Stop that!" The other's eyes were sparkling feverishly. "Face me, and keep your hands out in front of you, or I'll fire!"

Slowly, cautiously, Blair backed away till he was against the farthest wall, next to the window. Out of the corner of his eye he could see the fire escape.

"Don't make any mistakes!" Randolph warned. He waved the derringer. "I know there's a fire escape out that window, but you'd make a very inviting target on the sill, sir. My bullet would beat you. You'll be much better off to

wait for the police!"

Every nerve, every muscle, of Frank Blair's rawboned body was taut with strain. His face was pale beneath its tan and stubble. He stared at the strange little man across the room. Thought of the Mauser automatic in his own belt. Wondered if he could snatch it out before Randolph could fire.

From the hall came a faint buzz of voices, a slither of feet.

Sweat stood out on Blair's forehead. He stiffened, even tighter than before. Forced himself to laugh aloud.

The other's eyes were wary.

"No tricks, now!" he warned.

Hard knuckled beat an official roll on the door.

Blair half turned toward the window.

"So long!" he chuckled, but there were cold chills beneath his mirth.

"I'll shoot!" The little man was fumbling with the door latch.

Again Blair laughed.

"Don't bother. You wouldn't hit anything." He gestured toward the derringer Randolph held. "You said it yourself. That's a gambler's gun. It'll blow a man apart—at ten feet! But derringers are single shot, and beyond ten feet—I'm fifteen at least—it's pure luck if you even come near me!"

The knuckles outside the door rapped louder. There was the click of a key being inserted in the lock.

Randolph's jaw dropped. For an instant his eyes fell to the murderous little weapon in his hand.

IN THAT instant, a prayer in his heart, Blair hurled himself bodily through the window, arms wrapped about his head to ward off the splintering glass.

Behind him, the derringer roared.

Half running, half falling, Blair lunged down the fire escape.

Overhead, another gun opened fire. Blair heard the slug scream off the railing close beside him.

An open window loomed on the next landing. Blair leaped through it. Stumbled across a littered floor. In the darkness inches away, a woman screamed. A man roared incomprehensible, sleep-smothered words.

Blair cursed, snatched open the door. He darted off down the hall. Plummeted down interior stairs all the way to the basement. Then up again, out into an alley exit.

He scrambled into a cab two streets over, motioned the driver closer with a confidential air.

"I got in a fight in a bar," he explained. "My girl ran out on me. I think she took a cab. I want to find her."

"What's she look like?"

"A looker." Blair made elaborate anatomical motions. "A blonde, wearing a scarlet evening gown. Bare shoulders—"

The cabby laughed.

"That'll be a cinch. She'll stand out like a sore thumb. We'll start hittin' the stands."

The third cabstand carried the pay-dirt. A stubble-faced driver remembered the run:

"Yeah. This dame acted scared. She went out on one of them twisty streets off Buenavista—"

"Paul Kramer's!" Blair's eyes were gleaming. "I know the place. Let's barrel it!"

Kramer's home was black again. No lights showed anywhere on the premises.

Blair ran around to the rear of the house, tried the study door. It was locked. But a smart blow shattered one of the tiny diamond panes of glass in a window. Through it he manipulated the catch. A moment later was inside.

Silently, he crept through the dark, deserted rooms. There was no one on the entire ground floor.

Blair frowned.

"If she isn't here. . . ."

He pushed back the thought, moved cautiously toward the stairs. A stray streak of sullen light touched the telephone on its table by the front door.

The trace of a grim smile touched Blair's lips. He opened his pocket knife, snipped off the cords.

"No more interruptions. . . ."

Still in silence, he crept up the stairs.

A glimmer of light down the hall caught his eye.

Like one of night's own shadows, he moved toward it.

The light came from a near-shut door. It was erratic, elfin, firefly-like.

On tiptoe, Blair approached, peered into the room. It was a shambles. The bed had been torn up, the contents of drawers dumped helter-skelter, the rugs thrown back.

Again the light. A flashlight, playing from the portion of the room Blair could not see. The beam darted about the room like a living thing, probing, exploring, casting a thousand eldritch shadows.

IT WAS moving toward Blair slowly, that flashlight. He could tell it from the beam's increasing strength, from the shortening of its orbit. He opened his mouth, breathed through it, fearful lest the very sound of it in his nostrils should betray him. His hand wrapped round the butt of the Mauser in his belt, brought it out into the open. His thumb eased off the safety.

The light moved away again, off toward the far side of the room. But it was advancing down the room, also, for now Blair could almost see its bearer.

Another step forward . . . an-

other . . .

And then, suddenly, Blair's heart was pounding, leaping within him like a startled buck till he could scarce believe it was not echoing through the hallway like a throbbing jungle drum.

"Helen!"

It was soundless, that exclamation. A thought, more than a spoken word. A thought, and a knife twisting in Frank Blair's vitals.

Hesitant, the girl stood there. Her brows' smooth curve was drawn, distorted, her lovely face a worried oval in the gloom. She still wore the scarlet gown, but now the corsage of red roses was gone, torn away.

Slowly, she turned, the gold of her hair a rippling hood to brush the white softness of bare shoulders as she searched the room with the flashlight. Her back was towards Blair.

Gently, he pushed the door open. Stepped noiselessly inside. Eased the door to behind him.

He let the latch click shut.

The girl whirled. Her ripe lips were parted, her grey eyes fear-distended. The flashlight's beam struck Blair full in the face, blinded him. But he held the Mauser up, ready, pointed at where he knew she stood behind the glare.

The breath of a whisper:

"Frank!"

He nodded.

"Right."

She flicked the light down, out of his eyes. Saw the pistol. Stared up at Blair, bewildered.

Again he nodded.

"That's right. A gun. I'm leaning on the trigger."

"But—but why?"

He laughed harshly under his breath.

"What gall!" There was wonder in his tone. "You've got the nerve to ask me!"

"But—but—"

He shook his head.

"It won't wash, Helen. Not any more." His voice was flat. "Getting me up to your place so Humphries could slug me—that was too much. I went along, up to there, because I couldn't see anything but you, and loving you. But that slugging—it did the trick. It opened my eyes."

"He's my brother, Frank!" Her voice was a cry of anguish, throbbing with emotion. "He was afraid of you, afraid you'd turn him in. He couldn't trust you like I did. Remember, *your* brother is a detective—"

"Your brother!" The words were a whiplash of scorn. Blair's teeth were bared in a savage sneer. "There seems to be quite a bit of question about that relationship, Helen. Remind me to look it up sometime. If you're telling the truth, I'll come around to the women's pen and apologize to you."

"To the pen?" Her free hand flew up to the white column of her throat. Her lips were trembling. "Frank—"

"To the women's pen!" he repeated. His lean face was a hard mask of fury. "Or didn't you know they send even beautiful women to the pen for murder sometimes? We don't have the death penalty here any more, but we do put our murderers out of the way!"

"Murder!" She pronounced the word as if it were a loathsome thing, as if a creature of slime and filth and degradation had brushed against her.

"Murder!" His eyes were gleaming. "Judge Whitney kept a little memento of your visit, Helen. The roses—remember?"

HER body jerked as from an electric shock. Involuntarily her eyes darted down to the bodice of her gown, the bare bodice that bore a corsage no longer.

"Frank! You can't believe it!"

The panic was rising in her throat, her eyes agleam with fear. "I must have lost the roses. I never even saw Judge Whitney—"

"Ray Humphries said you were going to see Dave Randolph." He was relentless, inexorable as fate itself. "A cabby remembered picking you up there, bringing you here."

"But I didn't see Randolph, or Whitney either." She faltered, stunned, desperate. "They weren't at the State when I got there. I waited for a while, finally gave it up—"

"Could be." Again he laughed harshly. "Twelve good men and true will decide."

Abruptly, his left hand moved in a gesture that took in the chaos of the room.

"Looking for something?"

There were thin lines of dejection and fatigue about her mouth, her eyes.

"Yes. Kramer's papers." Her voice was an echo of despair. "He saw Ray a month ago, told him he had some new idea. I was sure he'd have a record of it, some evidence. But it isn't here, or in his office, either, or the study downstairs."

From the street outside came the faint sound of a car sliding to a halt. A motor cut off.

Blair moved swiftly to the nearest window, glanced out.

The car was a dark sedan. A man was getting out of it—a chunky, solid man in dark snap-brim hat and topcoat. He turned, as Blair watched, and started up the walk.

Blair swung back. His lips were twisted in a mirthless smile.

"The police department is giving service these days," he said. "I won't have to worry about figuring out a way to turn you in without getting nailed myself. My brother's coming up the walk now."

Helen Humphries reeled back as if he had struck her a physical blow. Her pale face mirrored sudden shock.

"Frank! You wouldn't!"

Blair's face was cold and hard as granite.

"Wouldn't I? What did you expect me to do?"

She stared at him, half stunned, her lovely face sagging in horror.

"But Frank—!"

"Forget it!" he lashed. "For you, I got into this. Right now, this minute, there's probably a 'shoot on sight' order out on me. My own brother's turned against me; he'd kill me now, if he got the chance." He choked on the words. A chill of emotion ran through him, as if an icy blast had struck him, naked.

"But what good will this do?" she whispered. "It won't help you—"

The seizure passed. Again his face was granite hard.

"It'll do plenty, baby. First I'm turning you in—you, and Ray Humphries. After that I'll work my way out of it, somehow, sometime." His red-rimmed eyes were glowing coals of hate. "I may not make it, Helen. I know that. Maybe the law will gun me down before I get a chance. But at least I'll have the satisfaction of knowing that I've done what I could to pay for letting you and that killer you run with make fools of me. That'll make it easier, lots easier."

EVER so faintly, he caught the sound of someone fumbling at the front door's lock.

"Get going, Helen. Meet him as he comes in, like a lady—"

"I won't!" Her body was tense, her white shoulders gleaming. Her breath came in little gusts. "You can't make me, Frank! If you try to, I'll tell him you're here, bring him up after you—"

Blair's smile was bleak as glacial ice.

He shook his head.

"No, Helen. No you won't." His eyes were locked with hers. "You see, I've got Ray Humphries, Helen—got him put away in a spot only I know about. In an icebox, Helen, a big commercial icebox. There's no ice, so he won't freeze, and he's got air enough for maybe two hours. If I'm not back by then. . . ."

"It's not true! You wouldn't—" Her voice was a hoarse cry of torment.

"Maybe not, baby." He was still smiling. "If it's a bluff, you can call me. Just turn me in, too, like you said. They'll probably sentence us together. . . ."

She was moving toward him, then, fighting the anguish, the weariness, the strain from her face as she came. She was lovely, ethereally lovely. Her pale face was uplifted, grey eyes glistening in adoration, red lips ripe, half-parted. Her slim fingers touched his lapels, his cheeks. The lithe poem in flesh that was her body insinuated itself against him.

"No, Frank." She shook her head as she said it, and the gold of her hair shimmered even in the semi-darkness like moonlight on the sea. Her whisper was a caress, her fingers cool ecstasy, her body soft, lush, inviting. "No. You won't turn me in. We mean too much to each other to have it end that way. We'll forget all this . . . turn loose my brother, let him go his way. We'll go ours . . . far, far away, Frank, where we can start over again. . . ."

Blair's lips were dry as bone, the skin over his cheeks taut as a drumhead. Cold sweat was standing out all over his body; it seemed, almost, that he could even smell its sharp stench. His muscles were twitching, the veins in his temples and throat throbbing, his heart pounding like a voodoo drum.

There was a humming in his ears, a numbness to his fingers. His eyes were wide and wild, the pupils dilated, great spots of bloodshot white about the iris brown.

"... but we mustn't stand here now, Frank. We've got to hurry—"

He rammed the Mauser's muzzle hard into her navel.

"God damn you, you tart, get going!" His voice was something alien—ragged, harsh, unreal. "Get going, before I blow your belly through your back-bone!"

SHE stumbled back, away from him. Her eyes were wide, unbelieving, her face drawn into a twisted mask. A sob choked her.

"Get going!" he lashed again. "Now, while you've got the chance. Run out of here, down the stairs, like you didn't know Al was there. Act shocked. Convince him he's trapped you."

Blindly, tears streaming, she turned. Drove herself out of the room, down the hall.

Light gushed from the stairwell.

For a moment the girl hesitated, shoulders shaking, as if unable to master her own body. Then, gathering up her skirt, she darted down the stairs.

Blair followed her to the edge of the hallway's shadows. He peered down. Saw his brother standing there, gun in one hand, crumpled corsage in the other, swart face savagely triumphant.

"Stop!" Al Blair barked the word.

The girl came up short. One hand flew to her throat in an instinctive little gesture of panic. Every line, every curve, mirrored sudden shock. She stared at the detective as if she could not conceive of his being here.

"I figured you'd be here!" Al Blair's voice was clear, harsh, vindictive. "No hack-driver could forget that dress." He stalked closer to Helen Humphries.

Shook the wilted flowers in her face. "You dragged my brother down into the gutter, you tramp, but by God, you're going to pay for it! I only wish they could hang you. . . ."

Upstairs, Frank Blair lurched back, fighting down the sobs that welled to choke him. He felt as if the blood had been drained from his veins, the life from his heart.

"Thank God that's over!" he mumbled aloud.

He jerked, then, like a puppet on a string.

An icy voice said:

"Not yet, chum. It ain't over yet. You're comin' with me."

CHAPTER VII

BLAIR knew that voice, knew it all too well. He tried to keep the sudden tension from his own.

"What is this, Lars?" He started to turn.

"Keep your eyes ahead, chum, till I tell you different!" The gaunt gunman's voice came like the crack of a whip. Black menace shrouded every word. "You don't catch me sticking a rod against your back so you can take it away from me, or letting you see right where I'm standing for a fast trigger play."

Blair froze in his tracks as if turned to stone. He licked his cracking lips, swallowed through a throat all at once too small.

"O.k., Lars. Take it easy. I won't give you an argument."

"You better be sure you don't, chum." There was something deadly, murderous, in the hoodlum's tone that somehow made Blair think of a cobra given human voice. "My nerves ain't so good tonight, and you're too full of smart tricks to suit me." He laughed briefly, like a saw hitting a rusty nail.

"Some stunt that was, putting the lights on the fritz back there at the Humphries' twist's place. It saved my neck, chum, but it didn't make me want to take chances with you."

"Well, what do you want me to do?" Blair made his voice impatient. "Just stand here till morning?"

"Let's not be funny, chum." There was no amusement in Lars' tone. "Just walk over, slow, till you're about three-four feet from the wall. And do it careful. I'll be right behind you."

Wooden-faced, Blair obeyed.

"Now cross your feet and stick up your mitts."

Again Blair did so.

"Fall forward against the wall, so your hands are holding you up."

"But—"

"Do as I say!" The gunman's voice dripped cold menace. "I wouldn't of lived this long if I'd taken chances."

Blair let himself tip forward.

"I can't hold this pose long," he grated. "My weight's on my arms, and—"

Lars chuckled mirthlessly.

"You can hold it long enough, chum."

His feet whispered on the hall carpet. Then his hand probed Blair's armpits, his waist, his crotch, his legs. He took the Mauser from Blair's belt, the jack-knife from his trousers pocket. Again his feet slithered, as he moved away. "All right, Blair. You can straighten up now."

Blair struggled into a standing position again. His eyes were angry.

"What now, Lars?"

"We leave. I got a car down the block."

In silence they descended the stairs, moved out of the house, and down the street.

The car proved to be a battered roadster.

"You're driving," Lars said. His left

hand dug into his coat pocket, came out with a pair of handcuffs. "Here. Lock yourself to the wheel."

He tossed the cuffs to Blair. In spite of his search, he still kept his distance. His blue eyes were cold and wary, his gaunt face taut with strain. The big gun in his hand never wavered.

"But how can I drive—?"

"You'll manage. There's play enough for that."

He held his distance while Blair opened the car door, looped the cuffs under the steering wheel's spokes, and snapped them shut on his wrists. Only then did the gunman walk around the car, climb in the other side, put the key in the lock.

"Just to keep you from gettin' ideas, chum"—he bared his teeth in an ugly grin—"the story books are full of people wrecking cars to get away from guys with guns." His blue eyes narrowed. "It won't work with me. You drive by the traffic rules. The first time you get over forty, or swerve an inch, I put a slug through you. Got it?"

Stiffly, Blair nodded.

"All right, then. Let's go."

"Where to?"

"Leave that to me. I'll tell you when to turn."

THEY ended up, finally, down close to the river. At Lars' order, Blair parked behind a warehouse's gloomy bastions. The gunman got out, again walked round the car, unlocked the cuffs, and then stood back while Blair climbed down.

Then, Blair ahead, still in taut silence, they walked down among the rickety small boat docks that lined the river.

"This is the one," Lars said. "Go on out."

It was not quite so rickety as the

others, this dock. There was a houseboat moored at its end. Yellow light gleamed in the boat's windows.

Together, they walked out on the dock. Fog hung low here—now wisps, now billowing clouds. The air was cold and wet, and reeking with river smells of damp earth and vegetation and decay.

"Get on board and inside the cabin," Lars commanded. "I ain't taking chances on you jumping in the river, chum."

Blair leaped to the tiny deck. Opened the door.

Cecil Johnson whirled to face him, snatching a sawed-off shotgun from his topcoat's pocket as he turned.

"Oh. You." The debonair bookie's face relaxed. "Where's Lars?"

"Right here, chum. Right behind him." The gaunt gunman moved into the cabin.

"Good." Johnson smiled thinly. "I trust you searched our friend before you brought him here?"

"Sure. Here's his rod." Lars tossed Blair's Mauser to the other.

"Good," Johnson repeated. He weighed the pistol in his hand. His eyes were thoughtful. "This is much handier than that sawed-off shotgun I managed to salvage back at Helen's apartment." He thrust the big weapon back into his topcoat pocket. Stripped off the coat itself and tossed it onto a corner bunk to the left of and behind Blair. "Well, shall we get down to business?"

Blair glanced around the room. It was about fifteen by twenty-five, and surprisingly well-furnished and comfortable. There were even attractively shaded electric lamps, and a telephone on a corner stand.

Johnson caught the surprise in Blair's eyes.

"Cozy, isn't it?" He smoothed his

thin line of mustache with an air of pride. "I've found it a very pleasant retreat. As you can see, I've even taken the trouble to have light and phone lines run out the dock, the way they do in trailer camps."

Lars interrupted:

"This ain't no time to play games, chum. You wanted this loogan for a reason. Let's get down to it."

Johnson nodded, dropped into an easy chair. He waved the crack-gripped Mauser at Blair like an admonishing forefinger.

"I agree with Lars, Blair. It's time we got on with business. What have you found out about Ray Humphries' cache?"

Blair stared at him.

"Are you crazy, Johnson? I don't know anything about it. I never have."

LARS moved up beside him, gave him a shove that sent him sprawling back into a chair.

"Can that stuff, chum." The gunman's voice was a harsh rasp. His blue eyes sparkled dangerously. "I was listening all the time you were putting the heat on that twist." He half turned toward Johnson. "You were right. He knows a hell of a lot more of the angles than he makes out. He made the Humphries tramp give herself up to his cop brother. He told her he had Ray Humphries stowed away in an ice-box."

"You see?" Johnson purred. "We've got you, Blair. From the moment you first maneuvered that escape from Helen's apartment, I began to consider you in a new light. At first I'd figured you for a woman-sick fool who didn't know what he was getting into. After that escape, though, it became obvious that you had a mind of your own, and even knew how to use it after a fashion. I decided you might be playing angles all your own—and from what Lars says,

I wasn't wrong."

"The hell you weren't." Blair's voice was husky. "Helen got me into this mess, but all I've been trying to do since is get out of it with my hide in one piece. That's my only angle."

"I'd hoped we wouldn't have to get harsh with you, Blair." Johnson's eyes were thin, thoughtful slits, his voice very quiet. "If you persist in this foolish attitude, however, you'll leave us very little choice."

Blair's lean face was expressionless.

"I can't help that, Johnson." His voice showed as little as his face. "I still don't know anything."

Johnson studied him for a long moment. Finally turned to Lars.

"You know, Lars, it's possible he's telling the truth."

"The hell it is!" The gunman's gaunt face twitched. His eyes glittered like cold blue glass. "Give me a chance at him, chum. He'll talk!"

Stiff-legged, he stalked over to where Blair sat. His left hand shot out, caught Blair by the hair. Jerked the other's head back savagely.

"Where is it, chum? Quick!"

"I don't know."

From his easy chair, Johnson held up a restraining hand.

"Hold it, Lars. We're playing this wrong. Let's ask him something he's admitted he does know." He leaned forward, waved the Mauser. His smile was that of a cat playing with a mouse. "Tell us this, Blair: Where is it you've got Humphries hidden away? We'll get the facts we want from him."

THERE was a sinking sensation in the pit of Frank Blair's stomach. All at once it seemed as if he could not get sufficient air.

"That was all a fake," he said huskily, and even as he said it he knew they would not believe him. "I wanted Helen

picked up, so I told her—"

Lars struck him across the face.

"You think we're nuts?" the gunman cried harshly. "You think we ain't even bright. You'll tell us—"

Again Cecil Johnson raised his hand.

"Wait, Lars. It might be true—"

The hoodlum whirled on him, gaunt face taut, eyes blazing, teeth bared.

"The hell you yell, chum! He'll talk, and now. I'll make him talk!"

"Oh, will you, now?" A sheen of frost seemed to settle over the bookmaker. "Remember, Lars, this is still my show. I'm the boss—"

The gunman stared straight at him, through him.

"Not any more, chum. Not any more." His voice was suddenly silky with sudden death.

"What do you mean, Lars? Are you disputing my word?" Johnson was bristling, his voice arrogant. But the color was draining from his face.

"Yeah," Lars whispered. "Yeah, I'm disputin' it."

Johnson's lips moved, but no words came forth. His cheeks were sagging, pasty grey.

"I don't like your way of doing business," the gunman said softly. "I think you're too yellow to make this punk crawl. That's why you don't want me to give him the treatment."

Johnson sat back in his chair. He swallowed hard. His eyes were fear-distended, his lips quivering, the Mauser loose in his fingers.

"I'm takin' over, chum!" Lars' eyes were pale blue chips of hell. "From here on out it's my show."

Johnson seemed to shrivel. He was suddenly no longer the dapper, debonair cynic. The smugness, the arrogance had gone out of him, leaving only a hollow shell. He licked his lips.

"But it's too big, Lars." His voice was a whine. "One man can't handle

it."

"Sure, chum." Lars' teeth were bared in a death's-head grin. "So I'm takin' on some new partners. Mugs like me, that know how this kind of a caper ought to be run. Moe Evans, Ed Garrity. . . ."

Like a great cat, he was moving toward the phone.

Johnson was staring at him. The bookie's breath was coming faster. His face was white as death.

Then, like a bolt from the blue, the hand that held the Mauser jerked up.

Lars' whole body convulsed, half leaping, half twisting. His face was a snarling skull, his body a crouching, contorted monster. The gun in his hand spoke once.

A SCREAM of agony burst from Johnson's pallid lips as the Mauser spun across the room. He clutched at his wrist, sobbing like a tortured child.

Blair was half out of his seat, but the gun in Lars' hand swung back to cover him.

"Back down!" Lars said. There was no emotion in his voice. Only violence, only death. "I want you alive, but I can use you crippled as good as whole."

Slowly Blair sank back.

The gunman picked up the phone, dialed a number.

"Moe? This is Lars. Remember?" The hoodlum laughed unpleasantly as obscenities burned the wire. "I'm changin' horses, Moe. You still want to get in on this caper? Then listen. . . ."

Incredibly soon, it seemed, they were there. Moe Evans. Ed Garrity. A chunky thug Blair had seen at the Hide-away Club. Sullen, suspicious, sinister.

Evans jerked the stub of cigar from his yellowing teeth. His black pig-eyes moved from Lars to Cecil Johnson,

still sobbing in his chair. Then back again, questioning.

The gunman laughed.

"He turned yellow, Moe. The game got too rough for him."

"So?" the fat gangster grunted.

"So I took over. Blair's got Ray Humphries staked out somewhere. We make him talk. Then we go after Humphries and the dough."

Evans nodded approval.

"That ought not to be too hard."

Blair's red-rimmed eyes met his.

"You're making a mistake, Moe." He was calculating his words, planning every detail, praying his face would not betray him. "I'm tired of being pushed around."

They laughed then, all of them, together, an unholy chorus of lethal mirth that made Blair's blood run cold. But he forced himself to go on:

"I mean it Moe." He poured sincerity into the words, tried to make them ring conviction. "This deal's gone sour. It was phoney to start with. Now it's suicide."

Moe Evan's fat sides shook.

"I love you, punk!" He bared his yellowed teeth in a savage grin. "It'll be a great day when you start worryin' about what happened to me."

Blair leaned forward. There was desperation in his voice.

"Use your head, Moe. Figure the thing out. From the start the whole thing's gone wrong. It's too complicated. Too many 'ifs' and 'whens' and 'maybes'—"

Glowering, Evans gnawed at his cigar. There was a glimmer of doubt in his black eyes.

"You got something there" he agreed. "I want that dough, but there oughta be an easier way. . . ."

"You mean you're turning yellow, too, chum?" Lars sneered from where he stood. And then, as Evans turned

on him: "Don't be a damn' fool, Moe. Can't you see the punk's stalling for time? He don't want us gettin' started with the business. He's scared for his hide—"

"Sure, I'm scared." Blair's lean face twisted. "I'm scared of what you ghouls may do without using what few brains God gave you. All you can see is that seventy grand. You're not paying any attention to what's between you and it."

Lars' blue eyes were chill.

"Let's get goin'," he said.

"Do you think I'd sit here and let you tear me to bits if I knew anything?" Blair lashed. His lips were dry, his voice trembling. "I'd tell you what you want to know, and let you go, and be damned of it." His voice rose, shrill, ragged. "But I don't know, damn it! I was with Ray Humphries, sure. He made me go to Tom Oglethorpe's with him. That's where I lost him. But he didn't tell me where that money was. He didn't even seem to know nimsself. He claimed he'd been framed. All he wanted was evidence—evidence to prove he didn't get that loot."

LARS was moving down upon him, teeth bared in a hideous grimace.

"That ain't the story you told the girl," he said. "You didn't say anything to her about losing him at this Tom Oglethorpe's."

"Of course not." Cold sweat was standing out on Blair's forehead. "All I wanted was to get clear. I figured if my brother got her and Ray Humphries maybe I'd have a chance—"

The gunman's face came close. His breath was foul in Blair's nostrils.

"Only you just said you didn't know where Ray Humphries was, chum." The blue eyes were glittering. "How could you turn Humphries in if you didn't know where he was?"

The beads of sweat on Frank Blair's head were joining. A tiny rivulet trickled down his temple.

"I thought maybe I could find him," he whispered, and even as he said it he knew that he had sealed his doom.

Lars seized him by the throat.

"Where?" he lashed. "Where is he, punk, before I throttle you?"

"I don't know," he choked.

The gunman shook him like a rat.

"Give, chum! It's your last chance!"

"I don't know."

Like a trap's jaw opening, Lars' fingers parted, let him fall back.

"If that's the way you want it, chum. . . ." The intensity was gone from his blue eyes. His voice was dead, toneless. "Take his shoes off, boys. We'll see how he likes our brand of hotfoot."

Moe Evans moved up on Blair's left. The rolls of fat about his face were glistening. Ed Garrity was down on his knees, clutching for Blair's foot.

Blair breathed a prayer, then. His face was white as any sheet, and his breath was coming in pants, and his brain racing like a mad meteor. Desperately, he tried to slow that racing. He knew what he had to do, and it was all control, all precision. It held no margin for error, no second chance to make good bungled work. One slip . . . involuntarily he shuddered.

A thousand times he rehearsed it in that instant, measuring Moe Evans' position, calculating Lars' chance to shoot, gauging how much strength his kick would take. He would have given ten years gladly to be able to turn, to glance just once at his objective. But he dared not do it; dared not so much as think it, for fear he would telegraph his thought, give warning of his plan.

And then Ed Garrity's blunt fingers were about his ankle, clutching at his shoe, while Lars stood coldly by, and

Evans' fat face sweated, and the color drained from the cheeks of the chunky thug.

Blair drew one last deep breath—and struck!

THE foot Ed Garrity held jerked back; then, lightning-like, lashed out again. It caught Garrity square in his sullen, battered face. Bowled him backward, screaming oaths.

Blair was rising before that foot came back to touch the floor again. Rising, stepping forward and to the left, feinting with his fists at Moe Evans' face. But only feinting; he dared not put his strength behind the blows.

Evans' fat face contorted in a snarl. He was lunging forward, savage, ruthless, big fists battering at Blair's defenses.

And Lars . . . Blair glimpsed him once. He was in his killer's crouch, gun out, blue eyes cold and hard and deadly.

Ever so slightly, Blair raised his guard. Let one of Evans' smashes slip through. It struck his cheek a glancing blow.

Blair rode with it. Reeled backwards. Backwards, and ever to the left. He smashed against the corner bunk, sprawled on it. Felt the cloth of Cecil Johnson's topcoat rough beneath his fingers.

A surge of triumph welled in him, swept through him. But he fought it down. Shook his head dazedly, as if half-stunned, while he scrambled backward, fumbling at the coat and trying to evade Moe Evans' thunderous charge.

His fingers found the pocket, then, and the chill steel and walnut of the thing he sought: the sawed-off shotgun, Ed Garrity's double-barreled shotgun, that Johnson had so casually thrust

into that pocket.

As he touched it, Lars' cold, blue eyes caught his. Murderous now, those eyes, and probing, searching for the slightest chance to shoot. Then, suddenly, the blue eyes saw the coat, and panic seared across the gunman's face—sheer animal fear, that leaped like fire in a dry pine forest.

Blair's hands wrapped round the barrel and stock. His fingers sought the trigger guard. There was no time to draw the gun. Not now, with Lars' eyes blazing death.

Blair rolled away from the shots he knew would come. His feet smashed into Moe Evans' midriff, hurled the fat man backwards, into Lars' line of fire, even as Blair's finger jerked the trigger.

The shotgun leaped in his hands like a living thing, wrenching his arms and knocking him backward. A great charred hole burst through the coat. The cabin rocked with acrid thunder.

As one, Lars and Moe Evans hurtled against the houseboat's wall. Then, while Blair watched, Evans sagged, clawing at his throat. He tried to speak, but the words gurgled out, unintelligible, through a dozen blood-bubbling founts in his neck and chest. Suddenly, the life running out of him, he slumped to the floor.

LARS still stood there, but where his face had been was now only raw red meat. Blair took one horrified step toward him. Its impact brought the gunman forward, lifeless, flat on the floor, with a thud that shook the boat. He lay there, with a spreading pool of blood about his head.

Blair's eyes sought out the others—Ed Garrity, quaking against the farthest wall; the chunky thug, green of face and sick of stomach; Cecil Johnson, still in his chair, clutching his

wounded hand, face white and wet, eyes fear-distended.

"I'm leaving now," he said. "Does anybody want to stop me?"

There was silence in the houseboat's cabin, the kind of silence that reigned ere life came to earth.

"If anybody does, I've got another barrel." Blair's voice sounded strange, even to him. He suddenly realized that his hands were trembling, that Cecil Johnson's coat still hung in tatters about the shotgun.

Muttering, he jerked it free. Backed toward the door. He was still shaking.

"I may stick around for a minute," he said, "in case any of you want to come out and pay me a visit."

He was outside, then, closing the door behind him. He turned, leaped to the dock. Stopped short, his heart in his mouth.

A wraith was moving down the dock toward him, a tall, raw-boned wraith in prison dungarees, with a too-white face and close-cropped blondish hair.

A wraith men called Ray Humphries.

CHAPTER VIII

THEY saw each other in that same split-second. Or perhaps Ray Humphries had a fraction's edge.

He flung himself sidewise, off the dock, into the water, as Blair pulled the shotgun's trigger. The next instant the big revolver in his own right hand was roaring. The first slug whistled like a buzzing hornet past Blair's ear.

By sheer reflex Blair leaped from the dock, then let the river's current carry him back under its shelter.

Again the revolver roared. A too-close pile splintered under the bullet's impact.

Blair stuffed the now-useless shotgun under his belt. Pushed silently out into the current on the houseboat's river

side. Allowed himself to float downstream, motionless as a drifting log.

The shot's last echo died. Silence settled over the river again.

The water was icy cold. Its very chill seemed to sooth Blair, to calm his frayed and tattered nerves.

Then, as the minutes passed, it began to bite into him. No longer was the water's flow a cool caress for his lean, fevered cheeks. He was shivering, the very marrow in his bones freezing.

Slowly, ever cautious not to splash, he swam in toward the river's bank again. Reached it. Crawled silently out, one more dark shadow amid the litter and debris along the shore. For a long moment, shivering, teeth chattering, he lay there. Then, at last, he pulled himself to his knees.

Like a thunder-clap of doom, the revolver roared again.

Blair felt the slug tear through the shoulder-padding of his coat. Cat-like, he spun about, dived headlong back into the river. Swam under water till it seemed his straining lungs would burst.

At last, far out from shore, he surfaced. Pushed on away, with long, bold strokes, toward the far bank.

The echo of a splash caught his ear. He rolled over on his back. Glimpsed a bobbing head, long arms plowing the water.

A little chill of panic touched him. He bellied over. Swam on again. Faster. Faster.

The far shore neared. Blair was panting when he reached it. He stumbled up the narrow strip of beach. Threw one look back.

Humphries was coming to his feet in the shallows downstream, shaking the water from his gun. Even as Blair saw him, the convict brought the revolver up and fired.

The bullet thumped in the muddy bank, too close for comfort.

Blair scrambled onward. The bank was high here, slippery as only river-bank clay can be, without footholds.

Humphries was running also. He topped the downstream bank, where it was lower. Sprinted along the edge towards Blair. Snapped a shot that sang a song of death inches away.

Blair saw the fugitive as a shadow atop the overhang, cutting him off. He raced back toward the water. His legs were like leaden weights, tripping him, dragging him down. A sob of fatigue broke in his throat.

Desperately, he swam for the other shore. Upstream, this time, against the current. The strain made him heavy, wallowing, but downstream was Humphries and sudden death. A dozen times the water broke over him. His control was going. He sucked the water in, strangled as it reached for his lungs.

He forced himself to stop, turn over, look back.

Humphries dived as he did so. The convict had run on along the bank upstream, faster than Blair could swim. He was there now, plowing through the water, cutting him off from above.

But the city shore was near now. Blair could see the warehouses looming like great sombre blocks of stone. And Johnson's houseboat, a pale pinprick of light along the shore.

He buried his face in the water. Forced his numbing arms and legs to move. Swam onward . . . onward . . .

BLAIR grounded in the shallows.

Stumbled out, onto the bank. Stared up uncomprehendingly at the looming, unbroken barrier of warehouses that hemmed him in.

No shelter here.

He threw another glance back. Humphries was nearing shore, gaining on him by the second.

A staggering madman, sobbing for

breath, choking, Blair turned. Lunged upstream toward the yellow lights that marked the houseboat.

Humphries saw him. Quickened his stroke. Came out of the water in one great rush, like some monster from those dark ages when the world was new.

On Blair plunged, and on. He was blinded, staggering, his lungs a great red ball of fire within him. Distantly, he heard Humphries' revolver roar. Felt a bullet slap at his side like a giant hand, tearing at him, half knocking him down.

Then the houseboat's windows waxed bright beside him. He was stumbling down the dock, falling through the door.

Ed Garrity and the chunky thug were gone. Otherwise the cabin was as he had left it—a blood-spattered chaos, furniture tossed helter-skelter, Lars and Evans dead on the floor. Cecil Johnson still sat white-faced in the easy chair, a clumsy bandage about his hand.

"Shells!" Blair sobbed. He was on his knees, unable to rise. "Humphries!"

Panic leaped to Johnson's face. He came out of the chair in a rush. Darted to the door. Slammed it shut.

A bullet smashed through it as the latch clicked. It sagged perilously inward as Humphries hurled himself against it.

Johnson jumped back. Left-handed, he snatched up the crack-gripped Mauser from where it had fallen that moment an eternity ago. Emptied it through the door. They heard Humphries scrambling wildly away.

"Shells!" Blair gasped again.

Johnson thrust the empty Mauser into his tweed jacket's pocket. He ran to a wall cabinet, whipped it open. Dumped a dozen twelve-gauge loads on the floor in front of Blair. There was another Mauser in the cabinet, too, the twin of Blair's save for the cracked

grip. Clumsily, left-handed, Johnson racked back the slide, thrust in the magazine. The slide slapped shut, ramming a cartridge into the chamber.

Blair fumbled with the shotgun, broke it open. With trembling fingers he shoved in two new shells.

From outside came Humphries' voice:

"You might as well give up! I've got fifty cartridges, and I'll use 'em all to get you!"

Slowly, Blair's strength was coming back. He stumbled to his feet.

"You'll have to, Humphries!" he called back. "This scattergun of mine's loaded now. Show your face and I'll fill it full of buckshot!"

OUTSIDE, the revolver roared an answer. Six spaced slugs tore through the houseboat's flimsy walls, too close for comfort.

Cecil Johnson's face was paler than ever. The thin mustache of which he was so proud twitched nervously.

"We're trapped!" he whispered. "If he keeps on shooting, sooner or later he's sure to hit us!"

Blair's own lean face was taut with strain. Desperately, he scanned the room, seeking some answer to their plight.

"Listen!" Johnson whispered.

Blair stopped, poised for instant action. A faint slither of sound came to his ears.

Johnson came close to him.

"What—"

Blair motioned him silent. His face was drawn in puzzlement.

Again the sound. It came from one of the side walls.

Suddenly, then, Blair understood. He dived for that wall, sweeping Johnson with him in one all-out lunge.

Even as they hit the floor the glass in the side window was tinkling under

a revolver barrel's impact, slugs smashing into the room.

Blair whipped the shotgun's barrel up, jerked the trigger. It blew away the window curtain, what was left of the glass.

Johnson was shaking in a spasm of fear.

"He crawled along the side!" he quaked. "One second more and he'd have killed us both!"

Blair did not answer. A red-and-black haze of agony was over his eyes.

Johnson shook him.

"Blair! What is it?"

"My side!" Blair choked. "He got me one before I made it in here. Not bad, I guess, but that jump must have torn it open." He was panting like an animal in pain.

"Try to hang on!" Johnson gripped his shoulder. "Maybe that last blast of yours did for him."

As if in answer, another volley whipped through the door.

Blair forced a savage laugh.

"That devil's got more lives than a cat!" he grated. "We're in the jackpot of all tight spots."

From outside, Humphries' voice suddenly echoed in a wild cry of triumph.

"All right, stay in there!" he belated. "Stay in there—and drown!"

Even as he said it, the houseboat gave a sickening lurch.

BLAIR and Johnson stared at each other.

"Can he do it?" Blair demanded.

Johnson's face had a greyish tinge. He nodded slowly.

"I'm afraid he can, Blair. The planking's old. A couple of good blows with an axe would stave it in. Or even a few feet of calking knocked out would let us sink."

"How deep's the water?"

"About eight feet, here." Johnson

hesitated, tried to force his lips into a wry smile. "Too deep for us to do much breathing, anyhow."

Again the boat lurched.

Blair struggled to his feet.

"That doesn't leave us much choice, Johnson. I guess we'll have to play our last card. Our deuce in the hole."

The way he emphasized it caught the other.

"Deuce?"

Blair laughed harshly.

"You can hardly call it an ace," he grunted. He walked over to the telephone in the corner. "I'm going to turn us in."

Johnson started.

"Of course! The phone! Even the police would be better than Humphries!"

Blair picked up the instrument, lifted the receiver.

Slowly, what little color remained in his face was draining. Dully, he set the phone down again.

Johnson stared at him, new horror dawning in his eyes.

"You mean—?"

"That's it." Blair nodded hopelessly. "We should have known better than to figure Humphries would overlook an angle like that. The line's out."

The houseboat was tilting now. A tiny waterspout gushed up in the farthest corner.

Fascinated, they watched it. Watched it till, moments later, the spout disappeared, merged in a widening pool.

Johnson sagged back, gripping his forehead in his good left hand.

"We're done. . . ."

Blair was breathing hard. Like an automaton, he turned, searching every nook again and again, while the water washed against his shoes.

"The far window!" Johnson exclaimed suddenly. He jumped to his

feet. "That's it! We can jump out of it, swim away—"

"And be shot like sitting ducks?" Blair shook his head. "If I know Ray Humphries, he's counting on something like that. He's probably sitting up there on the dock now, waiting for us. . . ."

"But we can't just stand here and drown—"

A sudden light flared in Blair's red-rimmed brown eyes.

"You're right!" he snapped tensely. "We can't." Deep in his throat he began to laugh. "We'll try it! We'll give Humphries something to shoot at!"

Johnson stared at him wide-eyed.

"Blair! Don't let go—"

Blair turned on him, and there was no hysteria in his face. His lips twisted in a grim smile.

"Do you have life preservers on this scow, Johnson?"

"Life preservers?" The other's face was a mask of blank bewilderment. "Why, yes, I guess so. A couple—"

"Get 'em! Quick!"

TOGETHER they sloshed through ankle-deep water. Dug the belts from beneath the corner bunk. Johnson's face was still uncertain, wary.

"Now put 'em on Lars and Moe Evans."

Dawn broke in Johnson's eyes.

"Of course! We'll set them adrift as decoys—"

"—And then we'll drop out the other window," Blair finished for him. He fumbled through Lars' pockets, came away with the gaunt gunman's car keys. "We've even got transportation."

Two minutes, it took them, two taut, tense minutes that lasted a million light years, with the water above their knees and rising faster every second. They stuffed the bodies through the window, while their stomachs writhed

within them, and their nerves twitched like trout flies at the ends of their lead-ers.

Then, at last, it was done, and they sagged back gasping.

"Are you o.k., Johnson? All right, then. Let's swim for it."

Blair said it, and he spoke aloud, with his face in the window, where Ray Humphries could not help but hear it if he were on the dock.

Three shots cracked out like exclamation points as he finished. Lars' floating corpse jerked under their impact.

But already Blair and Johnson were crossing to the houseboat's other side, themselves scrambling through the opposite opening. They were in the water as three more shots echoed and re-echoed over the river's silence.

Like ghosts they swam ashore. Scrambled up the bank. Headed at a dead run for the spot where Lars' car stood parked.

Behind them, more shots rang out, shots aimed at them, this time, shots that slashed the air too close behind them.

Frantically, they scrambled in. Blair jammed the key into the lock, stepped on the starter. The car leaped under them, swung away in a screaming curve that carried them on, between the warehouses, out into the street.

Dawn was breaking in the east now, painting the world a dirty, miserable grey. Blair drove into it like a madman, spinning around corners on two wheels as if the devil rode behind them.

And back whence they had come, another car roared to life and pursuit, slashing through the cold grey of morning, a meteor on wheels.

"Hurry!" Johnson lashed. "He's gaining!"

Blair gritted his teeth.

"I'm giving this buggy all it'll take!"

he snapped. "All, and more. Another mile an hour, and the wheels'll come off."

"Hurry!" Johnson begged, as if he had not heard. "He's gaining!"

They roared all the way to the end of Audubon, and then skidded round into Pine Street. They were getting into the fringes of the business district now, down where there were occasional early trucks on the street.

Still Humphries stayed with them, closing the gap between them.

"Hurry!" Johnson choked again.

The roadster's motor missed.

As one, their eyes flashed to the gas gauge. It registered as empty.

Again the motor missed. It began to cough. They were losing speed.

Behind them, Humphries was coming on like an avenging demon straight from hell.

"This crate's through!" Blair snapped. "We'll have to chance it on foot."

He tightened on the steering wheel. Braked and swung.

THE roadster skidded sidewise, careening, hanging between righting itself and going on over. It came in, over the curb. Smashed broadside against the grimy bastion of a downtown church. For an instant they sat there, stunned.

Humphries' car was screaming to a halt. The convict's gun was roaring. Slugs starred shard-spangled holes in the roadster's windshield.

"Come on!" Blair shouted. He was scrambling out as he yelled, dashing for the church's door, shotgun in hand.

Johnson panted in his wake.

Once more Humphries fired.

Johnson went down.

"Blair!" he screamed.

Blair whirled.

A bullet showered brick dust in his

hair. Another tugged at his coat collar.

Blair dashed into the church. Crouched just inside the door, the sawed-off shotgun ready.

From outside came an agonized voice:

"Oh, God! Don't shoot, Blair! Don't shoot!"

Blair's face was contorted, bewildered.

"Johnson! Is that you?"

"It's him, all right!" It was Ray Humphries' voice this time. "I've got him, Blair, and I'm coming in with him. He'll be in front of me, and damn you and your shotgun!"

One moment Blair hesitated, one moment only. Then he turned and ran.

"There must be a back way out of here!" he muttered.

He flung himself at the first door he saw. Unyielding, it hurled him back.

"Locked!" He snarled the word as if it were an oath, and he a trapped beast.

But there were footsteps behind him. He sprinted down a corridor.

It ended in more locked doors. Blair whipped up the shotgun, blasted at one of them. He kicked at the lock, smashed at it, hurled himself against it.

The dark, heavy wood did not so much as quiver.

Again the footsteps.

THERE was a stairway leading upward to the left. Blair took it, four steps at a time. Cursed as he saw the windows on the landing; they were narrow, of stained glass, with fixed sashes too heavy to break.

On to the next floor.

Here a broad hall opened to the right. Blair gave a gasp of relief, dashed toward it.

A bullet slashed across his path. He jerked back.

Humphries already was on the landing, smoking gun in hand, pallid face twisted in a snarl of hate, shielding himself with Cecil Johnson's cringing body.

To Blair's left, more locked doors. Another stair leading upward his only open way.

He raced to the next floor.

Here, not even a hall. Only doors, locked doors, heavy, unyielding. Doors, and another, narrower flight of stairs.

On again. On to the top, and a single door.

Blair clutched at the knob, a sob in his throat.

The door swung open.

He was up in the bell-tower now, with chimes high above him, and paneless windows opening out on all sides save one. There, a slanting plank catwalk led off through a gaping hole in the masonry to vast, gloomy, echoing lofts.

Blair took to the catwalk, ran into the lofts. He was panting, exhausted, his legs wobbling under him, but a strange, wild idea was forming in his mind.

In the shadows, he stopped. Hastily, he reloaded the shotgun. Then, tearing his handkerchief in two, he stuffed one strip into each of the two barrels. Rammed them in, wadding them hard, tight, as far down as he could get them, out of sight so far as any casual inspection might be concerned.

The bell-tower's door burst open again, slammed back against the wall with a crash. Cecil Johnson lurched through, Humphries on his heels.

Blair drew further back into the shadows.

"Don't come any farther, Humphries!" he shouted. "I'm through playing around!"

In the tower, Ray Humphries laughed.

"Don't kid me, Blair! I'm coming—and with Johnson in front of me!"

"Come ahead!" Blair challenged. His voice was wild, reckless. "You'll die with him!"

"No!" It was Johnson. He was screaming, sobbing, pleading. "For God's sake, Blair—"

"Sorry, Johnson. It's him or me, and we'll settle it here. I'm tired of running away." And then, to Humphries: "You're a damn' fool if you force this on me, Humphries."

"Do you think I care?" Humphries' voice was a ragged, hysterical razor of sound, slashing up and down the scale. "You turned Helen in, damn you! You gave her to the cops, so they could frame her like they did me! I'll kill you for it, Blair—"

He shoved Johnson forward onto the catwalk.

"It's suicide, Humphries!" Blair's words cut like steel. "I'm warning you—"

VERY carefully, then, he leaned forward. Held out the sawed-off shotgun. Let it fall from his hands onto the catwalk. Watched it slide down out of the shadows, into the bell-tower's light. Broke his words off sharply, as with dismay.

"Ha!" It was a scream of triumph that burst from Humphries' throat, a blood-lusting battle cry. "You lost it, Humphries, and I've got it! We'll see if you're as good at dodging buckshot as you are bullets—"

He started forward, toward the fallen shotgun.

"Stick 'em up, Humphries!" a cold, emotionless voice cut in. It had a clipped, official ring. "Drop your gun before you turn!"

The convict stopped short.

"Drop it, Humphries!" the voice repeated. A big, hard-faced man in

plainclothes was moving forward into Blair's view. Another of the same cut followed. Both carried Police Positives, ready to fire.

Humphries' mouth opened and closed, but no words came. His shoulders sagged. He seemed to shrink within his prison dungarees. Slowly, his fingers relaxed from around his revolver. The weapon fell to the floor.

The plainclothesman snapped cuffs on the fugitive's wrists.

Johnson had sunk down in his tracks, sobbing with relief. The deadly little sawed-off shotgun still lay where it had fallen.

"You, in there!" the plainclothesman bellowed into the loft. "Come out with your hands up!" And then, aside to his partner: "These damn' hoods! Shootin' up the main drag! Breakin' into a church. . . ."

But Frank Blair already was gone, back into the shadows, away through seemingly endless murky lofts.

"There must be two ways out of this place!" he muttered, just as he had those eons ago when first he entered the church.

At last he found it: a trap door, far back in one wing, with light seeping around it.

Blair opened it. Glimpsed a short, empty hall below. Warily, he let himself down. Dropped to the floor.

When he looked up, it was into the muzzle of a revolver.

Detective Al Blair now stood at the end of that little hall. His feet were wide apart, his stocky body solid as the rock of Gibraltar. Those things had not changed.

But there were new lines in the swart, rough-hewn face, and the eyes were ten years older.

"I figured this would be the place to nail you when they told me it was the only other way out of those lofts,

kid," he said between clenched teeth. And then, still cold and unrelenting: "On your feet! You're under arrest, and the charge is murder, first degree!"

CHAPTER IX

IT WAS one of those bleak, cheerless, grimy little cubby-holes so common to every police headquarters. Windowless. Buff paint scarred and scaling. Without furnishings, save for a battered oak table and three straight-back chairs.

Frank Blair sat in one of those chairs now.

The bigger of the two detectives occupying the other chairs leaned forward. He was a heavy man with a pleasant face, an easy-going manner.

"I'm not going to feed you the usual malarkey, Blair," he said. His voice was easy as the rest of him, friendly. "You're smart. They tell me you served three years with the Army's CID. You know the angles."

Blair said nothing.

"What we're concerned with here are six killings," the big man went on. "Six—remember? Sam Yerxa. Moe Evans. Lars Nielson. Paul Kramer. Tom Oglethorpe. Judge Whitney." He puffed at his cigarette, studied Blair's face. "Six men dead, Blair. Quite a crop for one night."

Blair's lean face was sagging with fatigue, his red-rimmed eyes distant, unseeing.

"I killed two," he said dully. "Lars. Moe Evans. With a sawed-off shotgun. It was self-defense. Lars killed Sam Yerxa. I saw him."

The big man nodded, puffed some more.

"All right, Blair. We'll give you those three for free. That's fair enough, isn't it? Three out of six, without an argument. He drew at the cigarette. "That

kind of trash doesn't bother us. Hoodlums. They come a dime a dozen. The more get killed off, the fewer we have to bother with. The statements the rest gave us"—he flicked a sheath of papers on the table by his elbow—"come close enough to backing you so we won't worry about 'em." He turned to his partner. "Mike, cross those three off. Lars Nielson, Moe Evans, Sam Yerxa. We'll forget 'em."

The smaller detective nodded.

"Right." He made a little ceremony of drawing lines through names in his stenographer's notebook. They're off."

"Good." The big man crushed out his cigarette, leaned back. His face was ever so friendly. "Now that's out of the way, we can get down to the others. They're the ones that really interest us."

"Get on with it!" Blair muttered. A little spasm of weariness twitched his cheeks.

"Sure." The big man was smiling. "I like to deal with a man like you, Blair. You know the score. None of this cheap business about being persecuted, or third degreed, or wanting to see a lawyer every two minutes. You understand that all we're after is the facts. No one's trying to frame you. If you're not the man we want, it'll be a pleasure to turn you loose. That's what a police department's for—to find guilty men, separate 'em from the innocent. If the evidence doesn't warrant holding a man, I'm the first to say let him go. That's what we're here for this morning, Blair. To consider evidence. I'm going to show you just what we've got against you. If you can explain it away, fine. We'll turn you loose. We don't want innocent men—"

"Get on with it!" Blair snapped. His nerves were jumping, his fingers twitching. His voice had a ragged edge.

"Of course, Blair. Of course." The big man's face was a study in sympathy. "I know you're tired, and we'll get this whole business over with just as soon as possible. I just wanted to point these things out to you so you'd understand our attitude." He leaned forward once more, extended his pack of cigarettes. "Cigarette, Blair?" It might help steady your nerves. Six killings is quite a strain—"

"I didn't kill them," Blair said. He ignored the pack.

THE big man drew them back, still nodding, still friendly.

"Of course." He paused. "There's one more thing I do want to point out to you before we get down to business. Not that you don't know it. You've probably brought it up to suspects yourself, back in the CID. But there's always a chance you might not give it proper consideration." His face was grave, his manner suddenly impressive. "That's the effect all this will have on others, Blair. Your brother, for instance." His fingers moved in a gentle little tattoo on the scarred table. "Your brother's a mighty fine man, Blair. None better. He'll go a long way in this department . . . if nothing interferes. And you can help him." Again he studied Blair. "You see, it's like this. After I've showed you how much evidence we have against you, you've got a choice to make. You can make a fight of it, even though you know you're licked—spread the case in headlines, make it a tabloid sensation. And that won't do either you or your brother any good, Blair. Not a bit." He shook his head, frowning. "It's bound to have an effect, you know. Al's superiors will begin to wonder a little about him, too. They'll ask themselves if it's smart to put too much faith in a man whose brother acts

like a rat in a corner. Public pressure comes in—maybe the chief would even have to put Al back to pounding a beat, just to quiet the papers. . . ."

The big man's voice trailed off. There was silence for a moment. Then, suddenly, the detective was leaning forward again, eyes gleaming. He brought his meaty palm down on the table with a smack.

"Or you can take it like a man, Blair!" His voice was vibrant. "You can recognize that you're licked, instead of beating your head against a stone wall. You can plead guilty, get it off your conscience. The trial will last minutes instead of weeks. No front page smear—the story'll get a stick of type back in the financial section. The judge will understand. I'll see to it he knows how you're copping a plea just to save your brother some bad breaks. He'll look at it from your viewpoint . . . consider how a woman dragged you into it, the mitigating circumstances. His voice dropped a note. "It all helps, Blair. You can stand up straight, with nothing gnawing at your insides. And you'll get off easier, too." He hesitated, just enough. "I can't promise anything, of course, but I wouldn't be surprised if you pulled a minimum sentence. Then, with a parole—"

Blair was having trouble with his breathing. His face was white and twisted, his mouth working. His heart felt as if iron fingers were squeezing tight about it.

"Stop it!" he lashed. His voice broke. "Stop it, damn you! Ask me anything you want to, but stop this—this—"

"Of course, Blair. I'm sorry." The big man's voice was silk-smooth. "I didn't mean to upset you. I was just trying to help. . . ."

Once more his voice trailed off. When

he spoke again, he was brisk, business-like.

"There are three main things we consider in this kind of case, Blair: motive, opportunity, and weapon." He paused. "I don't think I need to tell you how well all three fit you."

"No?" Blair's voice was toneless again.

"All three." The detective said it firmly, with force, conviction. "Let's take motive, for instance." He laughed shortly, as if the point were too obvious even to call for discussion. "Seventy grand is always a wonderful motive, Blair."

"Seventy grand?" Blair started. "What do you mean by that? I don't know anything about that damn' money."

THE detective smiled, riffled the papers at his elbow.

"I'm afraid that doesn't concur with these statements, Blair. You were close to the Humphries woman; she admits it. Obviously you must have learned some interesting things about that bank loot from her."

"I didn't! I'd never heard of it—"

The detective brushed it aside.

"As soon as you'd learned of Humphries' escape, you went into action. You jumped an armed man in order to get out of the Hideaway Club." His eyes narrowed as he said it. "That in itself might be taken as suspicious, Blair. Detective stories to the contrary, men don't jump guns without plenty of reason."

Blair's apathy was falling away. A spark of anger lighted in his brown eyes.

"I had plenty," he snapped. "Helen Humphries . . . I was crazy about her. I thought she was in danger. I wanted to help her—"

"Of course." The big man smiled.

It gave his lips a mocking quirk. "And that's why you went to Paul Kramer's—"

"I thought we were talking about motives. You still haven't told me what mine was." Blair was looking straight into the detective's eyes. "Why did I kill Kramer and Oglethorpe and Whitney?"

The other shrugged.

"That's only a detail, Blair. Somehow, it fitted in with your plan to get that seventy thousand. Possibly they might have interfered—"

Blair's harsh laugh cut in on him.

"You call that a motive?" His lean face mirrored disdain. "There isn't a man involved in this mess that didn't have that kind of a reason. Moe Evans, Ed Garrity, Lars, Sam Yerxa, Ray Humphries, Helen, Cecil Johnson—all of 'em were out for that dough. I was the only one that wasn't." Again he laughed. "If that's your evidence, I'll be out on a habeas corpus before night."

"Perhaps." The detective's face was a trifle pinker than before, but his voice was still silky. "However, there are other angles. Opportunity, for instance."

"All right." Blair settled back in his seat. "Let's hear about opportunity."

"Your own brother found you and Helen Humphries standing by Paul Kramer's body. When he placed you under arrest, you shot your way out. That's presumptive of guilt."

"I found Helen there ahead of me. She did the shooting, not me. She snatched the gun out of my belt. Does she deny it?"

"No." The detective shook his head. His broad face wore a faintly puzzled expression. "You say she snatched your gun?"

"Sure." Blair laughed shortly. "It

was a 6.35 Mauser with a cracked grip I'd taken away from Sam Yerxa. She grabbed it before I could stop her. The first thing I knew, she was shooting. After that, I didn't have much choice but to run." He shifted in his seat, swung back to the original subject. "We were talking about opportunity. Helen was at Kramer's ahead of me. Where does that give me opportunity?"

The other measured his words.

"We've only got your say-so that she was ahead of you. She claims she found Kramer already dead, then came out, and there you were." He leaned forward, his eyes suddenly like gimlets. "Maybe you were there first, Blair. Maybe you killed Kramer, then hid when you saw her coming and pretended you got there after she did."

BLAIR stared at the big man.

"What kind of comedy is this?" he demanded savagely. "Is this your idea of evidence? You're starting off saying I'm guilty, then building your case to prove it—"

"There's other angles," the detective interrupted smoothly. "We'll take 'em up soon enough." He paused. "Now, how about Oglethorpe? Do you deny you were in his room when he was shot?"

"Of course I don't deny it. He was shot through the open window—"

"Mighty convenient, that window." The big man chuckled without mirth. "It helps to explain a lot of things."

Blair choked back an angry retort. His lips were thin.

"Ray Humphries was in that room with me," he snapped. "He knows I didn't—"

"Does he?" The big detective cocked his head. "I'd hate to count on that if I were you, Blair."

Silent, eyes narrowed, Blair watched him.

"Humphries says he doesn't know a thing about that shooting, Blair. The other was smiling, a queer cat-and-mouse smile. "He says he was on the floor, half out from the slugging you gave him. Then, all of a sudden, you jumped up and started shooting."

"I was shooting at whoever killed Oglethorpe—"

"Didn't see who it was, though, did you?"

"Of course not." Blair's tone was hot. "It was dark outside. Whoever did the shooting was at the edge of the roof before I realized what was happening. I jumped up, shot at him—"

"Same gun as before?"

"Yes."

"All right." The big man leaned back. "Want to go on? Shall we talk about the Whitney job?"

"What about it?"

The other shrugged.

"Not much. You were there, though. That prosecutor, Randolph, can identify you."

"Identify me!" Blair's voice was a rasp of sarcasm. "Why in hell wouldn't he be able to? I went with him to Whitney's room—"

"Went *back* with him," the detective corrected.

"Wrong! I was never there before—"

The big man shrugged.

"Have it your way."

"Helen Humphries' corsage was in his hand—"

Again the shrug.

"She says she lost it," the detective said. "She doesn't know when. You were with her off and on, though. You could have taken it, planted it on Whitney."

BLAIR slumped in his chair.

"I give up," he grated. "I thought you wanted facts, so I was go-

ing to give you what few I had. But that's not what you're after. All you want is a confession."

"It would help," the other nodded. And then, leaning forward: "Why don't you quit stalling, Blair? You know you're done for. Get it off your conscience—"

"To hell with that noise!" Blair flared angrily. "Don't start that again."

"Whatever you say." Once more the detective was studying him with that peculiar cat-and-mouse expression. "Shall we go on, then, Blair? We've showed you had a motive. You've admitted you had opportunity; at least, you were in the neighborhood of all three murders. Now shall we try the weapon angle?"

Blair shifted disgustedly. Irritation had come into the lines of fatigue and strain that etched his lean face. His brown eyes were somber.

"Go ahead, if it'll make you any happier."

The detective turned.

"Mike, let's have that gun."

His partner reached into a coat pocket, brought out the Mauser. The big man weighed it in his hand.

"One Mauser automatic pistol, caliber 6.35 millimeters," he singsonged. "Serial number 100462. Other identifying marks: cracked grip plate." He held the gun out for Blair's inspection. "Yours?"

Blair stared, first at the man, then at the pistol. Suddenly his mouth was dry, his stomach queasy.

"I—I guess so." His voice sounded strange, strained. "I never checked the serial number. But the one I carried had a cracked grip just like that."

The detective laid the pistol down on the table before him.

"You know, Blair, we've got a damn' good ballistics man in this department," he remarked conversationally. "A real

crackerjack, a gun crank from way back." He chuckled softly. "The chief's humored him, too. Sent him to the FBI police academy. Spent a lot of department money getting him equipment—microscopes, cameras, fancy micrometers, everything."

Blair licked his lips in silence.

"Quite a guy, our ballistics man," the big detective murmured dreamily. And then, suddenly, he was out of his chair, gripping Blair's coat lapels, hulking over him, his eyes boring.

"Those three men were killed with a Mauser 6.35, Blair!" he thundered. "With *this* Mauser!"

Blair twisted vainly. The sweat was standing out on his forehead.

"It can't be!" he choked. "There's a mistake. It isn't the same gun—"

"The hell it isn't! It's registered in Sam Yerxa's name. We took it away from Cecil Johnson, and he swears he got it from you—"

"Johnson! That's it!" Blair was panting. "He's got a Mauser—"

"Sure, he's got a Mauser. It's in the lab now. But it's not the one that killed Kramer and Oglethorpe and Whitney. *This* is the gun that killed them, Blair—your gun, the one you've admitted a dozen times you carried all during the evening!"

"It can't be!" Blair choked again. The world was spinning around him. He began doubting his own mind, wondering if somehow he could be hanging between sanity and madness, killing without knowing. . . .

"Admit it, Blair! Confess it! You killed 'em!" The big detective's voice was thundering in Blair's ears, hammering at him, badgering him. "You had all three, Blair: motive, opportunity, weapon! You're as good as convicted right now. The jury isn't born that would let you go! Give up! Tell us the truth—"

IT COULD not be. It couldn't. Blair knew it couldn't. He told himself so a hundred times in those brief seconds. And as he told himself, it came to him.

Savagely, he jerked free.

"You're lying!" he rasped. His eyes were blazing. "You're lying to get a confession out of me. But you've lost. I didn't do it, not any of those killings, and you can't make me say I did."

The fire went out of the big man. He moved back to his chair, sat down. He was frowning.

"Blair, I'm not lying!" His voice rang with sincerity, with conviction. "That gun killed those men. I'll swear it on the bible if you want me to. Will you believe me then?"

"No."

"The ballistics man—"

"No."

"Your own brother—"

"Not Al—"

"Your own brother, Al Blair!" The big man came to his feet again. "I'll get him, and the ballistics man. They'll tell you before witnesses. . . ."

He was gone. His partner eyed Blair curiously.

"It's rough, son," he sympathized, "but you might as well give up. We've really got you, dead to rights."

"It can't be. I didn't kill them."

The big man was back.

"Come on. We'll prove it to you, in front of the whole bunch."

Slowly, grudgingly, Blair rose and followed him. The other detective brought up the rear.

The room to which they took Blair was a larger copy of the first. It was crowded now. All were there—Cecil Johnson; Ed Garrity; Ray and Helen Humphries; Dave Randolph, the Corwin prosecutor; the chunky thug from the houseboat; Tom Oglethorpe's son; Al Blair.

Their reactions to Blair's entry

varied. Garrity stared at him sullenly, Ray Humphries with blazing hate. Cecil Johnson's right arm was in a sling, but he had recaptured his cynically debonair air; he tossed Blair a mocking salute. The chunky thug avoided Blair's eyes. Randolph and young Oglethorpe watched him as if he were some strange beast on exhibit. Al Blair stared straight ahead, lips thin, swart face wooden, green eyes dull and glazed. And Helen Humphries. . . .

SHE sat there, eyes fixed on the floor, slim hands folded in her lap. Though she gave no sign she was so much as aware of Blair's presence, her lips were quivering. Her face sagged with weariness now, her hair tangled, matted, in the cold morning light. The scarlet gown was stained and grimy. Yet even now, as he looked at her, Blair's heart leaped. A leap of pain, not joy; it died in a dull ache deep within him.

The big detective brought forward a lanky man.

Quentin, our ballistics expert," he introduced. And, to the expert: "He won't believe his gun did the job."

The lanky man smiled. Turned to Blair.

"I'm sorry," he said, "but there really isn't the slightest doubt about it. To begin with, automatic pistols eject their own empty shells. Those shells can be identified by the marks the firing pin leaves on them." He shook half-a-dozen empty cartridge cases from an envelope. "These are Remington 6.35 millimeter shells found at the various murder scenes. I've given them a careful examination, compared them with test shells fired from your pistol. They all were fired from the same gun: a Mauser automatic, caliber 6.35 millimeter, serial number 100462. There's absolutely no possibility of error."

Blair stared at the man. His stom-

ach was a tight knot of nerves.

"You found them in all three places?" he asked huskily.

"In two of the three," the ballistics man corrected. "There were none at the scene of the Whitney murder."

Blair's heart jumped. A ripple of excitement ran through him. His voice was a gasp of relief.

"My God, don't you see?" he exclaimed. "Helen fired that gun while we were at Kramer's. I shot at the man who killed Oglethorpe. That's why the shells were there—"

"I'm afraid that's not good enough." The ballistics expert was shaking his head. "The bullets are the real evidence against you." He turned to the big detective who had questioned Blair. "May I have the pistol?"

The other extended the gun.

The ballistics man cracked back the pistol's slide, unsnapped and removed the locking pin, and lifted out the barrel.

"Practically all firearms' barrels, except shotguns, are rifled," he explained. "The patterns the lands and grooves you see inside the barrel, here, leave on a bullet vary from make to make and gun to gun. By use of a special comparison microscope, it's possible to determine whether a bullet came from a given gun—"

"I know all that," Blair broke in. He was taut as a bowstring, his voice like cracking ice. "What I'm saying is, that gun can't be the one that fired the shots that killed those men. It can't—"

"Again, I'm sorry, but it did." The ballistics man was positive as a direct command. He produced another envelope, poured out a cascade of slugs. "These are the bullets from those bodies, Blair, and comparison bullets I fired with this pistol, all properly marked and identified. There's no more chance of any of them having come from

another gun than there is of two sets of fingerprints being alike."

"No!" Blair whispered hoarsely. No! It can't be—" He stopped short. Desperation was in his eyes, his voice. "Maybe this isn't the gun I thought it was! I thought I could recognize it by that cracked grip. Maybe I was wrong—"

"I beat you to it, kid," Al Blair snapped harshly. His face was slashed with bitter lines. "I thought of that angle. But your fingerprints were still all over it, even on the magazine. . . ."

"Then they must have been killed before I got it—"

"You said yourself Tom Oglethorpe was killed while you were in his room!" the big interrogating detective lashed. "You were there, and he was killed, and your bullets are in him! You might as well confess. Make it easy on yourself—"

A BLACK fog was descending over Frank Blair. He could hear the voices that beset him as sound, but not as meaning. The faces before him jumbled in a weird, leering kaleidoscope. There was a wild roaring in his brain. His head was suddenly too small, his body without feeling.

The ballistics expert dropped the automatic's barrel back into place, slid home the locking pin. Blair's eyes were on the gun, riveted to it as if hypnotized. He watched the man snap the locking pin into place, push in the magazine. The slide slammed home.

It was like a window breaking, the crack of that slide. An opaque window, that had shut out the light, left him blind, groping in darkness. And now, with that single sharp burst of sound, the screen was gone, the light pouring in, the scene clearing. Blair's mind was a mad millrace of jumbled, tumbling currents. Frantically, he tried to sort

them, control them, make each fit into its place.

Then a voice cut in upon him, a low, clear voice, quietly rich and vibrant.

He jerked his eyes from the gun. Stared across the room at Helen Humphries.

She had risen. She stood there, poised and queenly, grey eyes looking into his. The wan ghost of a smile touched her lips.

But only for a moment. She was turning, then, her eyes flicking away as she faced the detectives.

"I can't go through with it," she said. "I can't see Frank framed to prison.

"I killed those men!"

CHAPTER X

THERE was stunned silence in the room; utter, absolute. For a long moment it held, while the tension grew like a tightening drumhead.

Then, as suddenly, it broke in a wild babble of voices.

One louder, more strident, slashed through the rest.

"The gun! What about the gun?"

It was Al Blair. He was close to the girl, eyes blazing green fire, thick fingers gouging into the white flesh of her bare shoulders.

"What about it?" he lashed again in a voice like thunder. "Tell me, you tramp! I want to know!"

The girl writhed under those torturing fingers.

"I had it!" she gasped. "I borrowed it from Frank. He'd never tell. He's trying to protect—"

"No!" Ray Humphries was on his feet, charging, his white face mirroring hell's own torment, his voice a scream of frenzy. "It's not so—"

His fist lashed out at Al Blair's head. The detective was spinning, ducking, even as the blow started, his own hands

knotting into great fists like oaken mauls. They smashed at Humphries' face, his body. They drove him back, beat him down, left him broken, mumbling, half-conscious, sprawled on the floor against the wall.

Again Al Blair turned on Helen Humphries.

"I want an answer!" he roared.

"She's lying, Al!" Frank Blair said. The lines of strain and weariness, the bitter twist, had gone from his lean face. His lips, his eyes, were smiling.

Wide-eyed, Helen Humphries stared at him.

"Frank! No!"

"Yes, Helen. You're lying."

"No, Frank!" Her voice was a cry of anguish, her shoulders shaking. "It's all my fault, Frank. I wanted to save Ray. I even helped him ambush you, dragged you into this. But I can't let them send you to prison! I won't!"

There were tears in Blair's brown eyes in that moment. His throat was tight, his tongue too thick, his heart all tenderness. He was walking toward the girl, taking her in his arms, comforting her. His trembling fingers touched her chin, pulled her face up so that she was looking into his eyes. The tear-streaked cheeks, the tangled hair, the tortured lines—incredibly, in spite of them, perhaps even because of them, she was more beautiful to him then than she had ever been before.

"I'm not going to prison, Helen," he said. Firm conviction was in his voice. "Do you understand, Helen? I'm not going. It was a gorgeous frame, but now I've caught the angle."

Unbelieving, incredulous, she clung to him, sobbing like a child with a broken heart.

"Tell me just one thing, Helen: Are you really Humphries' sister—not his wife?"

Mute, unable to speak, she nodded.

One moment Blair held her close. Then he was pushing her aside, away from him. His eyes were on Ray Humphries.

"I'm a fool, Humphries!" he snapped.

The convict's pallid face contorted.

"You're not framing me for this!" he snarled. He tried to struggle to his feet.

Al Blair hurled him back.

"Go on, kid!" The detective's green eyes were like icy jade, his voice a harsh, taut rasp.

FOR an instant Blair hesitated, wrapped in thought. Then, eyes narrowed, voice chill, he began his explanation of what had taken place:

"Three men died last night, but their murders go back five years. Back to Corwin, upstate, and a seventy-grand bank robbery, fingered by a trusted man."

Dave Randolph, the Corwin prosecutor, broke in:

"That's all past, Blair. It was brought out at the trial. We know how Humphries robbed the bank."

Blair shook his head. A laugh was harsh in his throat.

"Not this angle, Randolph. This is one you missed." He turned back to the others, went on: "This finger man was a smart guy. He knew that the chief of police had planted deer rifles with sharp-shooting businessmen all around the bank. A gang of heist guys wouldn't have the chance of a snowball in hell."

"That's what I told them!" Ray Humphries raved. "Why would I run out with them, knowing—"

"Shut up!" Al Blair lashed.

"When the gang propositioned this finger man, he agreed to work with them," Frank Blair continued. "He made three conditions, though—maybe

more, but I can guarantee there were three.

"First, he insisted that no one but the gang's contact man know who was fingering the job. That was for security.

"Second, he made them agree to knock down Tom Oglethorpe, the guard, and break his glasses. More security.

"And third"—momentarily Blair paused, every eye upon him; his lean face was suddenly hard—"third, he demanded that they take Ray Humphries along as a hostage! Why he picked on Humphries, I don't know—maybe it was an old grudge. But anyhow, he had to have a hostage to make his scheme work."

Again the babble broke loose. Ray Humphries was shaking like a leaf.

Cecil Johnson's cool voice cut through, smug, supercilious.

"I suppose that makes me the candidate for finger man, Blair? I was the only other person in the bank."

Blair studied the debonair bookie thoughtfully. When he answered, his words were cryptic.

"We'll come to that, Johnson," he said.

"Get on with it!" Al Blair lashed.

"Let's have it!"

Blair nodded.

"Since our finger man knew in advance that the heist would blow up, he made a few special advance plans he didn't tell the gang about. For one thing, he swiped the guns Anderson, the cashier, and Humphries kept in their cages. Then he stole seventy thousand dollars from the vault."

"Wait a minute!" It was little Randolph, the prosecutor, again. "That's impossible. The bank was examined the afternoon before the holdup. All the money was there then. And it was proved that none of the employees

left the bank the next morning. The police checked every move they made, searched every nook and cranny. They even checked the post office, on the chance the money might have been mailed out."

"It's *not* impossible!" Blair contradicted grimly. "I'll show you how the job was done, just as soon as I finish up with the heist itself."

"When the gang came in, everything went according to plan. Up to a certain point." Blair laughed bitterly. "At that point, the finger man showed just how crooked a double cross a trusted and allegedly honest man can pull. As the gang left the bank, he shot the contact—the only man in the gang who knew who was fingering the job—in the back with the cashier's gun."

"Then, knowing that Oglethorpe, the guard, was practically blind as a bat without his glasses, he slipped on a dark coat so he'd look half-way like Ray Humphries, ran out into the open, and shot the cashier dead with Humphries' gun. After that he stepped on the alarm button and sat back to watch the fireworks."

"By that time Humphries, carrying the suitcase full of loot, had been forced to run out with the gang to their getaway car. The businessmen opened up with their deer rifles, the thugs were shot to pieces, and that fool Oglethorpe—convinced he'd seen Humphries shoot Anderson because the dark coat he wore resembled Humphries' black alpaca jacket, and because the ballistics men said it was Humphries' gun did the killing—testified Humphries into the penitentiary."

A DULL silence fell over the room. Cecil Johnson broke it.

"And why did this mysterious finger man shoot Anderson?" he demanded, one eyebrow raised in a quizzical arc.

"Yes! And where's the money?" Randolph jabbered.

"One at a time." Blair's lips were thin, his voice tight with restraint. He looked at Johnson. "Anderson was killed so that he couldn't deny having shot the contact man. The finger was taking no chances on some surviving member of the gang figuring out that they'd been betrayed, and coming back to take vengeance."

He spun to face Randolph.

"As for the money, Randolph—it was with you!"

The little prosecutor's pinched features seemed to freeze.

"What d'you mean?" he shrilled. "I don't know anything about it! I was locked in the safety deposit room—"

"That's right," Blair nodded. "And so was the money." Then, catching the fear in the little man's face: "Don't worry. I'm not accusing you of anything. You just happened to be among those present. By now, the money's probably been years spent. But I guarantee you that it was in the same room with you during the robbery." He spread his hands. "Isn't it obvious? The one obvious and secure place to hide money in a bank is in a safety deposit box. Probably Johnson—yes, Johnson was the finger man—rented one under an assumed name long before the robbery. Then, the morning it was to take place, he quietly lifted the seventy thousand from the vault, found some excuse for going into the safety deposit room—"

"He let me in!" Dave Randolph whispered hoarsely. "He let me in that morning, and then stayed at the far end, fumbling around at one of the boxes—"

But another voice cut in on him. Ray Humphries' voice. It crawled with sudden death.

"Johnson!"

He was on his feet, swaying, pale

face twisted in a snarl of rage and hate.

"Stop him!" Blair lashed.

He need not have spoken. His brother Al's hand was against the fugitive's chest, pushing him back.

Blair swung about.

"Well, Johnson?" he demanded.

The debonair bookie smoothed his thin mustache. He was chuckling to himself, his eyes mocking and amused.

"Have your fun," he retorted. "If you enjoy telling these fantasies, who am I to interfere?" And then, suddenly serious: "If you really want my comments, however, I'll tell you frankly—as I have before—that you're an arrant ass." His lip curled. A sneer masked his face. "With three murders wrapped neatly up and laid on your doorstep, Blair, you're in a tight spot. I don't blame you for trying to squirm out of them. But I certainly *do* refuse to let myself be made the goat. So far, all you've done is to tell a few fairy tales regarding a five-year-old bank robbery. You've not even dared to mention last night's bloodthirsty little episodes."

Blair was smiling at him, a strange, bleak smile. His eyes were like glistening gimlets.

"Can you prove where you were at the time when those murders were committed, Johnson?" he asked softly.

"Hardly." Johnson leaned back in his chair, feigned a yawn. "Neither can fifty thousand other people in the city." Then, poking an indolent finger in the other's direction: "You're forgetting certain facts, Blair. For one thing, what conceivable motive did I have? My only interest in last night's massacres was in terms of forcing Ray Humphries to tell me where he'd hidden that seventy thousand dollars you so blithely claim I stole five years ago."

"No, Johnson." Blair shook his head slowly. He was still smiling. "That wasn't really your angle."

"Then what was, pray tell?"

BLAIR laughed. "Safety," he answered. "Security. The one thing that's characterized you all through this bloody mess. A month ago, Paul Kramer went to visit Humphries at the penitentiary." He turned to the convict. "Right?"

"That's right."

Blair swung back to the bookie.

"Kramer told Humphries he had a new idea about that bank robbery. He refused to tell what it was, but it was hot enough to get him excited. He said he'd been around interviewing you, and Tom Oglethorpe, and all the other principals in the case.

"What Kramer's idea was, we may never know. But it's a cinch that he must have let slip some hint of it when he talked to you, and it came close enough to the mark to scare the living hell out of you. You saw yourself going to the pen for Anderson's murder. Or, worse, Ray Humphries coming after you.

"Then you had a bright idea yourself. Not too good an idea, because it was complicated, like all the rest of your schemes. But good enough.

"You talked Moe Evans into putting Helen Humphries to work at the Hide-away Club, then blackmailing Ray with the threat of framing her. Since he'd been framed himself, you knew that would line him up. For bait to sell Evans on the idea, you dangled the picture of the seventy grand from that bank job, which you'd actually stolen and spent yourself, of course, but which you claimed Humphries had hidden.

"Knowing Humphries, and how much he thought of his sister Helen, you figured — correctly — that any threat to her would make him blow his top and attempt an escape. Only the pen here being a rough one, you

thought he'd be killed or caught in the attempt. In either case, he'd be discredited with Kramer; no lawyer's going to waste time trying to prove a convicted man's innocence when the convict concentrates on convincing the authorities he's a bad actor."

Blair laughed. It had a hard, unpleasant, contemptuous sound.

"I'll bet you puked green when you overheard Humphries' call to Helen, Johnson, and knew he'd made it over the wall! You had to change your plans in a hurry. Because your chums—Lars, Moe Evans, Ed Garrity, and the rest—were counting on torturing that nonexistent seventy grand out of Humphries, you didn't dare kill him outright for fear they'd turn on you. On the other hand, you were scared stiff he'd go to Kramer, and together they'd link it all up with Kramer's new investigations of that Corwin bank job.

"Finally you hit on what seemed like a perfect solution. You decided to kill Kramer, and all the other principals involved in that robbery, while still pretending between times to be hunting the money in order to keep your thug friends in line. To the law, it would look like Humphries' revenge. Yet actually you'd be eliminating any chance of their ever testifying against you."

CECIL JOHNSON stretched languorously. He had not lost his smug smirk.

"Sorry if I seem bored, Blair," he remarked caustically. "However, your dope dreams seem endless. You've yet to produce one solid tidbit of evidence."

"That's right, Blair!" echoed the big detective who had done the interrogating. "Three men are dead. Shot down—"

"—With your gun!" broke in the ballistics man.

"No!" Blair's voice was a savage rasp of denial. "*Not* with my gun!"

"Really, Blair—" The gun expert looked irritated.

Blair cut him short with one slashing gesture.

"Johnson owns a Mauser 6.35, too," he snapped. "Did you pick it up? He had it with him."

"Yes. He turned both the Mausers in."

"Was it registered in his name?"

"Yes."

"Serial number recorded?"

"Of course."

"All right!" Blair's lean face was hard, his eyes cold, his lips drawn back from his teeth in a mirthless grin. "I'll give you your evidence!"

He walked over to the table where the Mauser he had taken from Sam Yerxa still lay. Picked up the gun.

"Johnson killed Kramer and Oglethorpe and Whitney with his own Mauser," he explained. His words were clipped, brusque. "After each shooting, he picked up the empty shells, except at Oglethorpe's, where he didn't have time and was outside on the porch roof anyhow. The result was that my empties were the only ones found."

He turned on Quentin.

"Where does this model Mauser throw the cartridge cases?"

"Forward and to the right, about eight or ten feet."

"Then you still may find Johnson's shells in the grass below Oglethorpe's porch." And then, to the rest: "Johnson knew his gun could still be identified by the bullets taken from the bodies, of course. Probably he planned to ditch it as soon as he'd finished his killing; Randolph was the only one left. Then things worked out so he never got the chance to throw it away. First he needed it to help me hold off Humphries down at the houseboat. Then

Humphries grabbed him, and he didn't dare touch it. And after that the police grabbed them both."

"This is still very boresome," Johnson murmured. But his eyes were over-bright.

"He was desperate," Blair pressed on unheeding. "He knew that once that gun got to the laboratory, the prison doors would start swinging open. So then he got another of his brilliant ideas." He laughed harshly. "Too damn brilliant. It nearly sent me up for life."

His hands were moving as he spoke. Racking back the automatic's slide. Unsnapping the long pin that held the barrel in place. Pulling that pin out, laying it aside. Lifting out the barrel.

SILENCE settled over the room like a shroud as his fingers moved.

"Ten seconds!" he said softly between clenched teeth. "Ten seconds to take the barrel out. Ten more, to switch it for the one in the Mauser I'd been carrying; these parts are interchangeable. Maybe thirty seconds all told, to frame me for murder."

He turned to Quentin, the ballistics man. Held out the barrel.

"There's a serial number on this barrel, as well as the gun itself, Quentin, only they're not the same; this barrel doesn't belong with my gun. But if the number isn't the same as the one on Johnson's, I'll go to the pen laughing!"

The ballistics man's face was scarlet.

"I should have checked—" he stammered.

"Forget it. It wouldn't happen once in a thousand times."

"I'm sorry I can't become perturbed over your little discovery, gentlemen," the cool mockery of Cecil Johnson's voice cut in upon them. He chuckled, his face a picture of self-confidence. Stretched a little, still smiling. Rubbed

tenderly at the hand within the sling. "Of course, I'll want to see an attorney—"

And then, like a rattler striking, he was out of his seat, back against the wall, eyes insanely distended, teeth bared in a snarl of hate. The hand that had been rubbing his sling-shrouded arm whipped back, clear of the bandaged folds, and now it gripped the walnut stock of the sawed-off shotgun Blair had dropped to the catwalk back there in the church's bell-tower.

"A shotgun!" someone choked.

They stopped dead in their tracks before that weapon, every man of them. Even Al Blair's swart face had blanched.

"A shotgun!" Johnson mocked them. "I can use it even with my right hand crippled. You don't have to aim a shotgun!" His voice was wild as the skirling of highland pipes, his eyes agleam with mad lights. "Did you think you could get me, you fools? Did you think I wouldn't hold out one final ace?"

There was silence—taut, vibrant.

"I'm going now." Johnson's voice was not quite so wild, but even more it rang of murder. "I'm going right out this door, and down the stairs, and out of this building and your lives."

He looked about, studying every face, as if daring them to challenge him.

"Don't move, anybody!" Al Blair rapped. "Let him go. He can be picked up later."

"Thank you, Mister Blair!" Johnson's words dripped sarcasm. "I'm glad you're taking such a sensible attitude."

"Get going!" Al Blair grated. "You've got us cold."

Johnson shook his head.

"Not yet," he murmured. "One of you is coming with me. A hostage, shall we say?"

AN ICY lump sprang into being in the pit of Al Blair's stomach. He tried to hold his face rigid, emotionless.

"I think the lady would be best," Johnson said silkily. "Come, Helen! We're going to take a little trip."

They stared at her, all of them. They watched her as she rose, face calm, serene, eyes steady.

The lump of ice in Frank Blair's stomach was growing, expanding, sending out cold tentacles to clutch at heart and brain.

"No!" he said. The word echoed like the knell of doom.

"I'm sorry, Blair," the other mocked him. "I must insist."

Helen Humphries' grey eyes met Blair's. Her lips were trying to smile.

"It's all right, Frank. I'll go."

"No!" He spat the word like an epithet. Stood there, feet wide apart, head lowered, long arms swinging. "You're not going."

And then, to Johnson:

"You're through, Johnson. Your luck's run out. Lay down your gun. Give up while you've got the chance."

Johnson's lip curled.

"You must take me for as big a fool as you are, Blair." He brought the shotgun up. Pointed it straight at the other. "I'm going, and I'm taking Helen Humphries with me."

Slowly, Blair shook his head.

"No," he repeated. His voice was quiet now. "I'll tell you why, Johnson. I packed the barrels of that shotgun with rags. I meant to trap Ray Humphries. Now you've got it. If you pull the triggers, that gun's going to burst. It'll be like hanging onto a live hand grenade. They'll pick you up with a mop."

Desperately, as he spoke, he watched the other's face. Tried to gauge reaction. But there was no flicker of shock, no sign of fear.

"Of course, Blair." Johnson's voice was a tiger's purr. "I've taken care of all that, long since. Now I'm going."

Blindly, unheeding, Blair started forward.

Johnson swung the shotgun to cover Helen Humphries.

"One step more will do it, Blair!" he warned. A ragged note of uncertainty had crept into his voice. "One step more and I fire on your precious Helen!"

"Fire and be damned!" Blair said thickly. "If she goes with you she's as good as dead. This way, I can at least tear your heart out."

But his hands were shaking as he spoke, and his nerves were like hot needles of flame. He had eyes for Cecil Johnson only; he dared not look at Helen.

"One step more—"

"I'm coming, Johnson!"

It was a berserker's battle cry. Madly, he lunged, bare hands outstretched to clutch at Cecil Johnson's gullet.

A SCREAM of fear rose in the murderer's throat. Stark terror was in his eyes. He spun backward, away, whipping the shotgun 'round. In a panicked frenzy he jerked the trigger.

Orange fire burst about him. The room was rocking with thunderous sound, the scream dying in Johnson's throat as he smashed against the wall.

Half-dazed, Blair stood staring at the killer's shattered corpse.

"He thought I was bluffing!" he choked. "He didn't know I'd really wadded the barrels!"

Then Al Blair's big hand was gripping his in fellowship once more. Ray Humphries was at his side, emotion-straight, all gratitude. Men were thumping him on the back and bellowing praises. Helen was sobbing in his arms, clinging to him, part of him.

He held her tight against him, so

tight his arms ached, and emotion choked him, and a wonderful fierce poignancy tore at his heartstrings till he thought he must cry or die.

"It's over, Helen!" he kept whispering. "It's over, and I want you more than any words can ever tell. Will you marry me now, Helen? You said no before, but now the night and the horror are gone, and you've nothing more

to fear. It's like your song, Helen—'blood on the moon'; and now the moon has set—"

She raised her face, then. She was laughing through her tears, and the grey eyes were aglow with love, and the red lips very close to his.

"There's another line to my song, Frank," she answered. "Remember—? 'Now I've changed my tune'!"

"NOTHING BUT THE 'TOOTH!'"

"**T**OOTH-PRINTS" have in recent years taken on an importance in crime detection almost as great as finger-prints. Many criminals have been seized and brought to justice as a result of clues left by their own teeth or their victim's. In some cases, when fire or blasts have made identification impossible in any other way, the teeth have shown positive evidence, for they are the most durable part of the body, and one of the most individualistic.

By means of records kept by dentists which have innumerable times identified both criminals and victims and by means of their own complete studies, the F.B.I. has seen the tremendous importance of such identification. Just as many authorities feel that permanent records of everyone's fingerprints should be filed, it has also been suggested that permanent dental records of all persons in the country be kept in the F.B.I. files. The difficulty of accomplishing such a task on a nationwide scale, however, and certain legal aspects make such an endeavor impossible at present. Nevertheless, crime detection through the teeth continues to be of importance.

In Santiago, Chile, there is one of the finest and most modern dental schools. The building of this great institution came about through a case of crime detection involving the teeth.

The case broke just before World War I. A fire had partially destroyed the German embassy in Santiago. When the police checked the building, they found in the furnace the charred remains of a man's body with the skull bashed in.

The German ambassador identified the body as that of the consul. At the same time it was discovered that the embassy safe had been opened and a huge sum of money stolen. Both the theft and murder were blamed on the building janitor, who was missing.

Dr. German Valenzuela, the medical examiner found a flaw in the case against the janitor, however. Since the consul was an older man, the examiner felt that it was unusual for his teeth to have been so well preserved. Only one tooth was missing in the dead man's mouth. The consul's dentist confirmed Valenzuela's suspicions when he

revealed records and charts showing that a great deal of dental work had been done and that actually several teeth were missing and had been replaced by bridgework.

Further investigation revealed that the janitor had only one tooth missing! Dr. Valenzuela deducted that it was the consul who had killed the janitor and stolen the money. Trying to throw the guilt on him, he had then fled but was apprehended just before reaching Argentina.

An apology had been demanded by Germany, but when the facts of the case were disclosed, she agreed to pay an indemnity to Chile. Chile, in turn, offered the money to Dr. Valenzuela as a reward for his work in the case. He refused it, however, suggesting instead that it be used to build a fine dental school so that everyone might benefit from it.

BULLET TO SPARE

SUICIDE or murder? How often the criminal investigator is faced with that primary problem!

Take a recent case which temporarily baffled the police. A young woman was found dead in her room. Signs of a struggle were evident; the room was in disarray; and the gun which she held tightly clasped had fingerprints other than her own. When the police arrived her body was still warm, and the development of rigor mortis had not begun.

Yet there was one unusual condition. The hand in which she held the gun was stiffened to the extent of rigor mortis. Despite everything else which seemed clearly to indicate foul play, this single fact was enough to free any suspected murderer.

Known to investigators as a *cadaveric spasm*—this phenomenon quite distinct from rigor mortis—may take place immediately following death. Thus if a gun or knife were in the hand of the person at the time of the death, he would continue to hold it tightly after death—even though there were no rigor mortis in other body parts.

When this situation is found, it is almost always an indication of self-imposed death. It would be an impossibility for another person to put any weapon in a dead person's hand and have it remain tightly closed.

—Sandy Miller

No Trouble At All

By H. B. Hickey

THE bartender made quite a business of wiping the bar, although it was dry as far as Mancuso could see. Twice, as the husky little man watched, his glass was lifted and the bar-rag slid under it.

Mancuso looked at his drink. Hell, it was flat already anyway. He lifted his eyes to find the bartender waiting and watching him expectantly.

"Okay," Mancuso said flatly, "you can give me another."

"Same thing?"

What difference did it make? Mancuso didn't want to drink, he'd picked this spot because it was just across the street from the dance hall.

"Same thing."

Mancuso's dark features remained expressionless as he watched the big ex-pug behind the bar pour his shot into the glass of soda. The bartender slid the drink in front of him, took the dollar bill and rang the register. When he brought back the change he saw the black eyes still on him. He leaned against the bar, the wood making a deep dent in his paunch, and grinned at Mancuso.

"I wasn't meanin' to hustle you, friend, but—"

Mancuso nodded and the big man went away. The woman on the stool next to Mancuso's watched him as he sipped for a second at his whiskey and soda. Her beer was almost finished and she wanted another.

"You look nervous," she said.

The little man's eyes took her in at



It's no trouble at all to stab a man in the back, and it is usually a smart idea to clean the knife. But blood stains deeply . . .

Mancuso came up very quietly
behind the killer as he drew
the knife from the dead man



a single glance. Once she had been a good looker, now the thick layer of powder and rouge could not conceal the heavy lines in her face. There was the smell of dime store perfume that exuded from her, and the roots of her hair showed dark where it was starting to grow out. Most of her hair was a bleached blonde.

"Why do I look nervous?" he asked quietly.

She thought it over for a second, honestly pondering the question. At last she decided what it was.

"Your eyes," she said. "They're squidjus."

His lids dropped very slowly and as slowly lifted. "What's squidjus?" he asked solemnly.

The female bar-fly leaned a little closer to him so he could see into the deep V of her dress. He wasn't looking down but there was always the chance that he would.

"You know: squidjus." He still didn't seem to get it so she tried again after fixing for a moment his black eyes with her bleary blue ones.

"Squidjus, nervous, like you did something."

Mancuso didn't blink. "Like what, for instance?"

"Oh, I dunno, your eyes are sorta creepy. They look like you maybe would kill someone." Her shudder was real enough.

Mancuso changed the subject. "You come around here much?" he asked her.

She smiled and nodded. "Sure. All the fellows know me. Peaches, that's my name. Peaches." She let her hand fall on his knee. "Ask anyone; they'll tell you I'm a good kid. I let—"

He cut her off. "I'm sort of looking for someone," he said quietly. She looked disappointed so he slid out another bill and put it on the bar.

"Have a shot on me," he suggested.

She tried hard not to look eager but failed.

The whiskey made her eyes brighter. "Maybe if you don't find the girl you're lookin' for—" she suggested.

"It's not a girl," Mancuso told her. "I'm looking for a man. I thought he might maybe come around here once in awhile."

Her voice was louder than he would have liked. "If he comes around here I'll know him. Peaches knows everyone! Ask anyone—"

"Kind of a fat guy," Mancuso continued. "Not real fat, but pretty heavy. He's tall, maybe six feet, and he's fat all over. He wears his hair long and it sort of curls in the back. He's nice looking and he's got a smooth line."

THERE was an odd light in Peaches' eyes as he finished his description. When she spoke her voice had dropped to a whiskey roughened whisper.

"Does he like to dance?" she asked.

Mancuso nodded. "Yeah, he likes to dance."

"I wouldn't know him," Peaches said quietly. She slid from her stool and started for the door. Mancuso didn't try to stop her.

The big man behind the bar was walking away from him when Mancuso looked up. He had the feeling that he'd been overheard but it was too late to do anything about that.

The door opened and Mancuso turned toward it. Before it closed he could see that it was dark outside now and from where he sat he could see the dance hall marquee lit up. The dancing would start soon.

The ex-pug came back slowly, wiping the bar as he came. When he got to Mancuso he paused.

"Another?" he asked briefly.

Mancuso looked at his watch. It was time for the dance hall to open.

"No," he said. "I'll be going now."

He was among the first at the box office, which was flanked on both sides by white statues of dancers, and he paid his dollar and ten cents for the pink ticket which admitted him. It was a steep price, he reflected, but the Gion was obviously out for the better class of factory girl and housemaid.

The orchestra was warming up as he came onto the floor and there were several girls dancing with each other. Mancuso looked around and found the stairs which led to the balcony and climbed them slowly. He picked a side seat in the front row where he was in the shadow cast by some dusty drapery and lit a cigarette.

In a few minutes a kid attendant came along. He watched Mancuso smoke for a second, started to speak, hesitated, and then said quickly, "No smoking inside the ballroom, sir."

The dark man nodded and said, "Sure," but kept on smoking and after a minute the attendant went away.

The ballroom filled slowly, some men bringing their own girls and getting started at once, while most came individually or on groups of a single sex. At first the girls stayed together in the corners or in little bunches along the side walls, but as the proportion of men increased they were pulled out one by one. Finally, there were just a few girls who weren't dancing and it was plain that those were the hopeless ones who would never be asked to dance.

It was strange that when the fat man came at last, he picked his partner from among the wallflowers. Mancuso spotted him as soon as he came in and his dark eyes watched the big man glide over the floor. The girl with whom he danced was obviously a beginner but her partner danced with the grace common to so many big men and managed to keep going smoothly.

MANCUSO got up and went down to the floor where he could keep a closer watch on the big man. It was too thick with people though, and he found that he would have to dance if he wanted to stick with his quarry.

The girl he picked was a shy creature, not good looking, and wearing a formal gown that was obviously a hand-me-down. She was a good dancer, however, and content to stick to dancing without any conversation, which suited Mancuso just fine. He maneuvered around until they were dancing directly behind the big man and he could hear what the other was saying.

The big man had a good line. "I think being a maid in a nice home is a good job," he was saying. "When you add it all up you make more than these factory girls do. Besides, it's an education. I could tell in a minute that you were used to being around people who knew how to act."

The girl was eating it up. The big man whirled her around smoothly and Mancuso could see he had large, soft brown eyes and even white teeth when he smiled. His clothes were expensive and plainly dark, setting him off from the others around them.

"Who did you say you worked for?" the big man asked. The music had stopped for a second and he patted the oily ringlet on the back of his neck.

His girl said something in a low voice and the big man whistled. "That's high society," Mancuso heard him say. "I'd certainly like to see the inside of that home!"

The girl smiled shyly and almost whispered her reply and the big man smiled down at her. "That's very nice of you," he said.

There was an intermission and the couples walked off the floor, Mancuso sticking very close to the other. Many of the dancers headed for the bar in

the ballroom lounge and the big man steered his girl that way too. As they reached the lounge the big man hesitated.

"Tell you what," he said to the girl, "why not go to some nice place for a bite to eat? It's hard to get acquainted with so many people around."

His girl smiled eagerly. "Oh, that would be swell, Mr. Smith! If you wait just a second I'll get my wrap." She went off toward the cloak room.

Smith was leaning against a column when Mancuso slid alongside him. For a brief second the brown soft eyes met the cold black ones and then Mancuso let the man feel it against his ribs. The brown eyes grew suddenly wide and Smith sucked in his breath.

"Let's take a walk outside," Mancuso said quietly. "Take it nice and easy, like you were going for some fresh air."

The big man took it easy. Mancuso stayed close enough to him so that no one could get between them and yet not so close that there was a chance to turn on him.

Outside Mancuso told him, "Down the street. I'll tell you when to stop."

When they got to his black coupe Mancuso took the keys from his pocket with his free hand and opened the door. "Get behind the wheel," he ordered.

"I don't know how to drive," Smith protested.

"You better learn fast." He sat in the corner, away from the other keeping the gun covered with a thick, broad hand.

The fat man drove expertly. His face was beaded with sweat and when they stopped for a light Mancuso could see the twitching in his right cheek.

"I don't get it," Smith said at last. "If this is a stickup, why don't you get it over with?"

"Shut up and drive."

THEY were headed south and they kept going that way until they were past the downtown district. At that point Mancuso told him to turn west and in a few minutes they were in the heart of the wholesale and jobbing section.

At its very edge, next to an alley in which they could hear the scurrying of rats' feet, they parked before an old three-story red brick building. There were some second-hand window fixtures in the window of the main floor store, and on its right a dark doorway led to the lofts above.

A creaking elevator took them up to the top floor and Mancuso pointed the way down along a corridor where a forty watt bulb that was covered with dust and fly specks showed the paint peeling from the walls.

Mancuso stopped at an unmarked door and turned the knob. He motioned Smith in and as the big man stepped into the doorway Mancuso smacked him between the shoulders and sent him sprawling into the center of the small room.

When he got to his feet Mancuso had turned the light on. The dark green shade was down and the room was empty except for an ancient rolltop desk, on which a dusty phone book lay; and a single chair.

Smith's fleshy lips were tight with hate as he dusted his knees. "That can get you grief," he said softly. The twitching in his face was worse now and he was breathing hard.

Mancuso stepped in close and drove his fist into the soft belly and the big man doubled over and said, "Ughhh . . ." in a sick voice.

For a while he breathed in rasping gulps and when that slowed down Mancuso slapped him hard across the face with the phone book. It made a black smear on his sweating face and the

twitching stopped.

"Feel like talking?" the dark man asked. He pointed to the chair and the big man dropped into it gratefully.

"Now. About that Grayson job," Mancuso said quietly.

The big man shook his head. "I . . . I don't know what you're talking about."

The phone book hit him again, knocking him out of the chair into a sitting position on the floor. Mancuso pulled him up by the hair and dropped him into the chair again. Smith was moaning softly.

"You were going to tell me about that Grayson job," Mancuso said emotionlessly.

"I didn't do it," the big man gasped.

This time Mancuso kicked him in the ribs while he was on the floor. The big man was crying softly and his tears made grey streaks on his cheeks.

"I know you didn't do it," Mancuso told him. "You wouldn't have the guts to kill anyone. You're just the finger man. You romance the maid and case the job; then your pals take over and knock it off while you're setting up another."

"You got me wrong," Smith pleaded. "I wouldn't . . ."

The edge of the phone book made red scratches in his face and made the tears flow faster. Under the coating of dirt his right cheek was swollen and raw.

"Better talk." Mancuso's voice was relentless. "Your friends won't do anything to you that I won't do . . . only I'll do it slow. There was over a hundred grand in jewelry in the Grayson safe and it's still too hot to dispose of. Where is it?"

The big man was trying to talk now but his voice was a bare whisper. He held both hands over his heart. Mancuso bent down to hear better and the

bullet went over his head into Smith's mouth.

The next one dug a groove in the rolltop but Mancuso was behind it. He threw two slugs at the door blindly over the edge of the desk. One of them hit the door jamb, scattering splinters, and the dark man heard someone curse. There was the sound of running feet away from the office and then the creaking of the elevator on its way down.

The husky man went down the stairs fast but when he hit the sidewalk the tail light of a car going around the corner was all he saw. There was no chance of catching it.

MANCUSO got into the coupe and headed north again, cursing to himself as he drove. He'd slipped up, not checking to see if he was being tailed. On the other hand, no one had followed them out of the dance hall—of that he was certain.

The tavern under the el was crowded now, and he chanced a quick look through the door when someone came out. The bar was lined with customers but Peaches was not among them. The bartender was gone too. The dark man tried the next tavern going west.

There were at least ten taverns in the block and it wasn't until the last that he found her. This place was darker than the others and most of the patrons were drunk. Peaches had one of them against the bar, and she was leaning against him when Mancuso came in. At first she did not recognize the dark man; when she did, she laughed.

"It's squidjus!" she told her companion. Her eyes were no blearier than they had been before although it was plain she was drunker. The V in her dress was deeper where someone had torn the snap that held it together.

"Didja kill anybody yet?" she asked loudly. Mancuso paid no attention to the eyes that were turned toward them. He shook his head.

"Not yet," he said softly. He showed her the bill in the palm of his hand and motioned with his head toward the door. "I'd like to talk to you for a minute," he told her.

She grinned foolishly. "That'll get you more than conversation," she said.

Mancuso let the offer lie. He steered her down to where he had parked the car and pushed her inside. He let her talk while he pulled the car down a side street.

Carelessly he slid his arm above her shoulders and let it rest on the back of the seat. She turned her face toward him, a vacuous look on it.

"Whadja want to talk about?" she asked.

"That guy who likes to dance," Mancuso told her.

Her eyes were frightened. "I don't know anything about him."

The dark man got a fistful of bleached hair and pulled it. "I just want to know about his friends," he said. "You said you know everyone around here. Maybe you could tell me who he hangs out with."

"Whyncha lemme alone," Peaches whined. "I told you I don't know anything. I'm sorry I said anything about a guy who likes to dance. It was a gag."

"It better not be a gag," Mancuso said coldly. "If it is . . ." He pulled her hair tighter.

"Please lemme go, mister," Peaches begged. "I don't wanna get mixed up in anything. If they find out I been talkin' they'll kill me."

"They won't find out," Mancuso assured her. She was half out of the seat now as the pull on her hair grew stronger.

"I . . . I don't know much," she gasped. "I just seen them in the tavern lately. I think they're from New York. The big fat guy—they call him the 'Waltz King'—he and Mike, the bartender, are pally. Then there's another one, a tall skinny guy they call Rocky. They just been around the last few weeks."

"Any more?" Mancuso asked.

"That's all I ever saw. The fat guy brings girls in there almost every night but they go in the back room."

"How about the bartender? How long has he been around?"

"I told you!" Peaches whined. "Just the last three weeks or so."

Mancuso was satisfied. "All right. Do you know where any of them live?"

Peaches started to say, "No," but the look in Mancuso's eyes changed her mind. "Mike lives at the Vermeer Hotel. It's about a block down on the other side of the street from the tavern."

"That's all I want to know," Mancuso told her. "Here's your ten bucks. Now keep your trap shut and you won't get into any more trouble." He let her out and she scurried away from the car.

HE DROVE past the Gion and parked the coupe a few doors past the hotel, behind a light delivery truck. There was a sign on the front of the hotel, that said, Rooms . . . \$2.00 A Day And Up.

Inside Mancuso stopped at the grimy desk. The man at the desk had tired eyes and a long nose on which red veins formed a network.

"We ain't got no rooms," he told Mancuso.

"That's okay," the dark man said. "I'm just looking for a friend of mine. Mike, the bartender from the tavern under the el."

"Tsk, tsk!" the man at the desk clucked. "You just missed him. He checked out about a half hour ago."

If he had said fifteen minutes Mancuso might have believed him. If he had said an hour and a half Mancuso might have believed him. Half an hour was too short a time or too long.

"Have any idea where he went?" the dark man asked.

Dirty fingernails scratched the red veined nose. "Now lemme see . . . I think he said somethin' about goin' down to Union Station to get a ticket. Seemed like he was in an awful rush."

Mancuso said, "Thanks," and ran for the door. Once outside, he walked back down the street and sat in the coupe waiting. In about ten minutes Mike and a tall, thin man came out. The thin man was carrying a brief case. Mancuso started the motor and let it idle.

The two men got into a maroon Olds in front of the Vermeer. Mancuso let it go by, along with several other cars, and then slid the coupe out. He stayed a little way back and when one of the other cars turned off into a side street he waited for another to come up from behind and take its place.

After a while they were in a dingy neighborhood where the signs on the store fronts were mostly in Italian. Most of the houses were two-story affairs with the entrance set flush with the sidewalk. Before one of them the Olds drew up. Mancuso went right past them all the way to the end of the block and turned the corner. He got out and walked back.

He came back on the other side of the dark street and before he drew opposite it the two men were inside. Mancuso waited, and after a little while someone came out and drove the Olds away. He had to wait until the man who had driven the car away came back.

The shades in the house across the way were drawn and even when Mancuso sneaked alongside it he could not get a glimpse of anything inside. At the back of the house he found an entrance to the cellar but it was securely locked and he could not take a chance of making any noise.

The other door of the house was on the side and he had tried that and found it locked too. There was no back porch, only a small balcony on the second floor. It hung over the cellar doors, unsupported, but there was a drain pipe running down from the roof alongside it and Mancuso took a chance on that.

It held his weight and he slowly climbed until he could get a grip on the rail of the balcony. In a moment he drew himself up and over the railing. A board creaked under his feet and for endless minutes he stood still, waiting. Nothing happened.

The door that had opened onto the balcony was boarded up and the window that overlooked it was securely locked. It was an old-fashioned window with six small panes of glass in the upper half. Mancuso got out a knife and cautiously set to work on the lower center pane of the six.

The old putty was dry and came off in small chunks that Mancuso was careful to catch as they fell. A few got past him and made light sounds on the floor of the balcony. In a little while the pane was loose and he was able to get the tip of the knife behind an edge and pry it outward, toward himself.

He set it down gently on the floor and stuck his hand through the opening it left. The shade in the room was up and he was able to unlatch the window without any noise.

THE second floor seemed to be unoccupied. From downstairs came

a faint murmur of voices. Using a pencil flashlight, Mancuso crept along until he found the stairs leading down to the floor below. As he went down the voices got louder and he did not worry about the few treads that creaked.

At the bottom of the stairs he found the inside door of the first floor. He had his gun in his right hand and with his left he tried the knob. It turned smoothly . . .

Mike and Rocky sat at a table, each of them with a glass of wine in his hand. Mike had a fresh piece of tape on his cheek where a splinter had dug in.

"Get 'em up!" Mancuso barked.

They looked startled, but not startled enough. Too late Mancuso realized that there should have been three of them in the room! Before he could swing around something hit him on the side of his head, and for him the lights went out . . .

His head ached and he was nauseated. He tried to sit up and found he couldn't. His hands were tied behind his back and his feet were lashed together. He lay on the floor and in the next room he could hear someone talking. It was not Mike or Rocky.

"Not in my place," the voice was saying. "You two want to hide out here, that's all right with me. One hundred a week apiece and you can stay as long as you want. But that's all. You want to get rid of that guy in the next room, you do it some place else."

He had to get his hands free, Mancuso thought. There wasn't much time. But whoever had tied them had done a good job and the harder he tried to work them loose the more his head hurt. As he twisted about, something wet and salty ran down his cheek and a little got in his mouth.

Finally there was a little give in the

cord that bound his hands. With a tremendous effort he pulled his wrists apart farther, the cord cutting deep into his flesh.

In the other room Mike was talking. "But Gino," he pleaded, "if we try to take him out of here and then come back we may get caught. We don't know if he's got someone else working with him or not."

"That's just what I was thinking," Gino said. "I think it be the best thing if you take him away and don't come back at all. I'll get the car and pull it up in front. You be ready with him as soon as I get back."

Mancuso heard him get up and go out. There was silence for a moment and then the scuffling of chairs. "I don't think that's such a good idea," Mike said. "I'm not taking any more chances. We'll take care of the little guy right now. When Gino comes back we take care of him too. Then we're in the clear."

"I like that better," Rocky agreed. "Let's go."

"You wait in the hall with the brief case," Mike said. Mancuso heard him come toward the room in which he lay.

THE door swung open and the big man stood framed in yellow light in the doorway. Mancuso lay with his hands behind him, eyes almost shut, watching Mike come toward him.

The ex-pug bent over him and the husky little man saw that he held a gun by the barrel. A shot would be too risky but the thud of the gun butt would hardly be heard outside the room.

Mike wasted no time with formalities. Beside Mancuso, he dropped to one knee and swung his arm up. It rushed downward again with terrible force. Only Mancuso's head was not there and the butt smashed into the

floor where it had been.

Mancuso gave him no chance to recover. Hard fingers stabbed Mike's eyes, blinding him. Before he could cry out Mancuso brought the edge of his hand down hard across the back of the big man's neck. There was a sharp crack.

Outside the house there was the roar of the Olds motor and then a horn, sharp and imperative. From the hall Rocky called, "Mike! Hurry it up!"

Mancuso heard the outside door open. "Where are they?" Gino demanded.

"In there," Rocky told him. Gino's feet thudded toward the inside door. The footsteps grew louder and then stopped.

Gino said "Ahhhh . . . in a long sigh and Mancuso heard a body crumple to the floor.

When Mancuso came out of the dark room Rocky was pulling the knife from Gino's back. It came out red and the tall man paused to wipe it on the dead man's shirt. He took too long.

When he looked up Mancuso was almost on him. Before Rocky could get the knife up Mancuso had a knee in his groin. The tall man went down with a groan but rolled over fast and Mancuso missed a kick at his head. But the knife was on the floor now.

As Rocky reached for it Mancuso's fingers bit into his wrist and twisted back. The taller man got his teeth in Mancuso's arm and bit down hard but the other hand was already at his throat, forcing his head back. In a moment it was over.

Mancuso found the brief case in the hall. There was no one on the street when he came out. In front of the house the motor of the Olds purred. Mancuso shut the door behind him and walked down the street fast . . .

MANCUSO had to go up to the fifty-first floor of the New York skyscraper to get to the office. It looked like the other offices on the same floor. The frosted glass on the door was covered with gilt lettering: Himber Insurance Company, Department of Fire and Theft, Adjustment Division.

The reception room was luxurious. Mancuso nodded to the pretty blonde girl at the desk and she smiled at him. She waved at the door, marked Investigation, George Pullet; and Mancuso went right in.

Behind the mahogany desk sat Mr. Pullet. He looked well-fed and well-cared-for to the tips of his manicured fingers. His face had a freshly powdered look and his eyes were well rested.

"Mr. Mancuso," he said, smiling softly. His smile was not meant to be pleasant, but ironical.

Pullet leaned back in his well-upholstered chair. "It is customary for our men to send in reports when they are away from the office," he reminded Mancuso gently. "You have been gone three weeks and we have heard not a single word. That is highly unorthodox, to say the least."

Mancuso didn't bother to answer. Instead he tossed the brief case he had brought in onto the desk. "Here's the Grayson stuff," he said laconically.

For a second Mr. Pullet's eyes widened. He reached out and pulled the brief case toward him and opened it. From inside the case he pulled a necklace that glittered green with emeralds. After that came pendants, rings, brooches.

"This is most gratifying," he told Mancuso. "It seems to be all here." Pullet stuffed the jewelry back in the case and smiled up at the dark man.

"I'm sure you didn't forget to make out your expense sheet," he said.

Mancuso handed over a folded sheet

of paper and Pullet studied it. He chuckled to himself.

"Not too bad," he said, "although I can't quite make out this twenty-five dollar item."

"I had to rent an office," Mancuso said. Pullet smiled at him as though there were a secret between them.

"We won't question that item," he

agreed. "You did quite well, after all." For the first time Pullet seemed to notice the white patch of adhesive tape on Mancuso's temple.

"You didn't run into any trouble, did you?" he asked solicitously.

The black eyes looked down at Mr. Pullet without expression. "No," said Mancuso. "No trouble at all."

DEATH SEEKS THE M.D.

By GARY LEE HORTON

AT TEN one winter evening in 1936, Dr. Peacock walked out of his fashionable Edgewater Beach apartment in Chicago never to return. The circumstances surrounding his disappearance and subsequent death remained hidden during two weeks of frantic police work. Every possible motive was delved into, but the solution to this seemingly unfathomable mystery was not discovered until Captain Harry O'Connell of the police recognized the significance of several isolated incidents heretofore ignored on the police records.

Dr. Peacock was a pediatrician, and highly successful in his profession. He was respected among his colleagues as one of the city's most skilled young doctors in that field. Having a large established practice, he was not in the habit of answering emergency calls during the middle of the night. But on January 2, 1936, a call about a sick child roused him from his bed and sent him speeding northward in his sleek black Cadillac. His wife remembered his destination as the home of G. Smale, 6438 North Whipple Street. Later when the Bureau of Missing Persons tried to call on G. Smale they found no such person residing at that address. There was, however, a G. W. Smale living at the opposite end of the city—at 6438 South Washtenaw Avenue.

The names and the house numbers tallied, but the streets were separated by the length of the city. This was only the first of the confusing coincidences which misled the investigators and made the Peacock case one of the most baffling puzzles in Chicago's lurid crime history. The police were soon convinced that G. W. Smale of South Washtenaw Avenue had no connection with the case. That name was absent from the doctor's list of regular patients. All police efforts to trace the missing doctor met with failure, and it was rumored that he had probably chosen to drop out of sight deliberately. Slanders even made vague accusations concerning certain aspects of his private life.

But on the evening of January 3rd, the time for speculation suddenly came to an end. The battered body of the good doctor was found

slumped in the back seat of his automobile. According to the coroner's report, the death had occurred but two hours after the doctor was last seen. An overcoat had been tossed over the body, shielding it from the view of passers-by. His professional case lay open and its ordinarily gleaming instruments were strewn on the seat and on the floor, spotted by blood which had stained the upholstery, the floor, and the rear windows. His crumpled, bloodstained hat rested on the seat. As accustomed as police and news reporters are to scenes of violence and tragedy, the men who came upon the doctor's body were appalled and shaken by what they saw.

The doctor's body bore signs of fanatical, pointless violence. His head had been slashed with a sharp instrument, his crushed skull bore the unmistakable signs of many terrible blows struck with a heavy club of some sort. His left hand had been caught and smashed in the door as it closed.

WITH the finding of the body the investigation took a more serious turn. Reporters who had joked about the secret spree the doctor had set out on, now attempted to track down clues to aid the police and bring the facts of this crime before the public.

Was it robbery that had led to such a brutal murder? There was the puzzling presence of considerable silver in a trouser pocket and valuable personal jewelry which had remained untouched. The bereaved Mrs. Peacock insisted that the wallet had contained no more than \$20.

Was the murder seeking possession of the narcotics in the instrument case? Although the absence of two small vials seemed to render truth to this theory, it is entirely unlikely that a baby specialist would be administering narcotics to his infant patients. Rumors to the effect that the very respected doctor might have been murdered by hired killers of a dope ring began to spread like wildfire. The unimpeachable testimony of the head of the American Medical Association revealed that Doctor Peacock was doing highly secret investigations for the United States Bureau

of Narcotics.

Days were passing. The public was clamoring for the apprehension of the bloodthirsty killers. Meanwhile the police found themselves running around in circles, and rather embarrassing ones at that! The fingerprints inside Dr. Peacock's car were smudged and useless. Witnesses who had seen the car earlier on the evening of the murder could not agree on their stories. The narcotics angle had led nowhere. Detectives checked the parents of more than five hundred patients without unearthing a disgruntled person or a situation involving the slightest indication of heart interest. A key stamped "428," which was allegedly found in the doctor's possession and caused many a raised eyebrow and suspicious question, turned out to be the key to the apartment of the parents-in-law of the deputy coroner working on the case. The investigator had somehow mixed a key of his own with the exhibits taken from the pockets of Dr. Peacock.

The police found themselves stranded without a shred of evidence with which to continue the investigation. Elsewhere in the city the wheels of crime were still turning. On the night of January 16th a seemingly remote and irrelevant episode began to form a pattern which eventually, though very slowly, spelled out the solution of the Peacock case.

Dr. Joseph Solderger was robbed of \$37 and his car. Five days later a Dr. A. L. Abrahams lost \$56 to gunmen. On February 14th, Dr. L. A. Garness was robbed of \$6. Each of these routine crimes made only a little entry on the police blotter and a brief flash over the police radio system.

CAPTAIN HARRY O'CONNELL first recognized the relationship of these apparently isolated incidents. His attention was focused on the problem on the night his own brother, Dr. John P. O'Connell, experienced a brush with four men who forced him from his car at Surf Street and Sheridan Road. The doctor gave battle and escaped, but firmly imprinted in his mind was a description of the four men who had attacked him. Three were tall and husky, the fourth much shorter than the others. All the robberies of the doctors were similar in detail. Each featured a call to hurry to a bedside; an address in a lonely neighborhood; an ambush. And these robberies were always planned to occur very close to

ten p.m.

Following O'Connell's hunch, the Medical Journal published definite instructions to be followed by any physician receiving a "suspicious" summons after nightfall. But rather than wait for a call to come in, O'Connell put his wits to work. A series of petty holdups in his district brought young Robert Goethe and his pal, Durland Nash, to the captain's attention. An order went out and these two were rounded up with some of their hoodlum pals.

Sergeant Andrew Aitken watched with unusual interest as the three tall husky boys were brought in. With three others, he had been waiting for some physician to call in accordance with the instructions in the Medical Journal, but no such call had arrived. During his waiting Aitken had studied every known angle of the Peacock murder, and his imagination had formed a picture of the slayers—whether right or wrong, it was clearly etched. The picture flashed back to him now as he saw Goethe, Nash, and their friends. Aitken and O'Connell put their heads together over the matter, and decided to investigate the men's connection with the Peacock killing.

Within two days, Aitken and O'Connell knew for certain they had not lost their gamble. The physicians who had been robbed—and had survived—viewed the three prisoners and identified them unhesitatingly. Under questioning the three weakened and revealed their guilt. Quarreling, accusing each other, they laid bare in its terrifying details the repulsive history of their crimes.

With robbery as their motive, the three boys with a fourth as their look-out, had ambushed and killed the unsuspecting doctor. Disappointed at finding only \$20 on his person, they continued to vent their morbid anger on the already dead doctor. The age and mental state of the criminals explained many of the discrepancies of the crime that had bothered the police. The trials of the Peacock killers were sensational; they crowded newspaper headlines for several weeks. The doctor's attackers were meted out the sentences they deserved by the courts. Emil Reck, Bob Goethe, and Durland Nash were given identical terms of 199 years plus consecutive terms of one year to life on four robbery counts. The fourth member of the gang, seventeen-year-old Mickey Livingston, was given a thirty-year sentence.

One of the most shameful crimes of personal violence in Chicago's history was solved.

SILENCE IS GOLDEN

THERE are numerous ways of catching criminals. Sometimes, however, they are seized purely by accident. Such a case took place in a tourist camp in Texas recently. The proprietor reported to police headquarters that the dining room of his camp had been broken into, and the cops came out immediately to check on it. A complete search was made throughout the camp premises, but the burglar

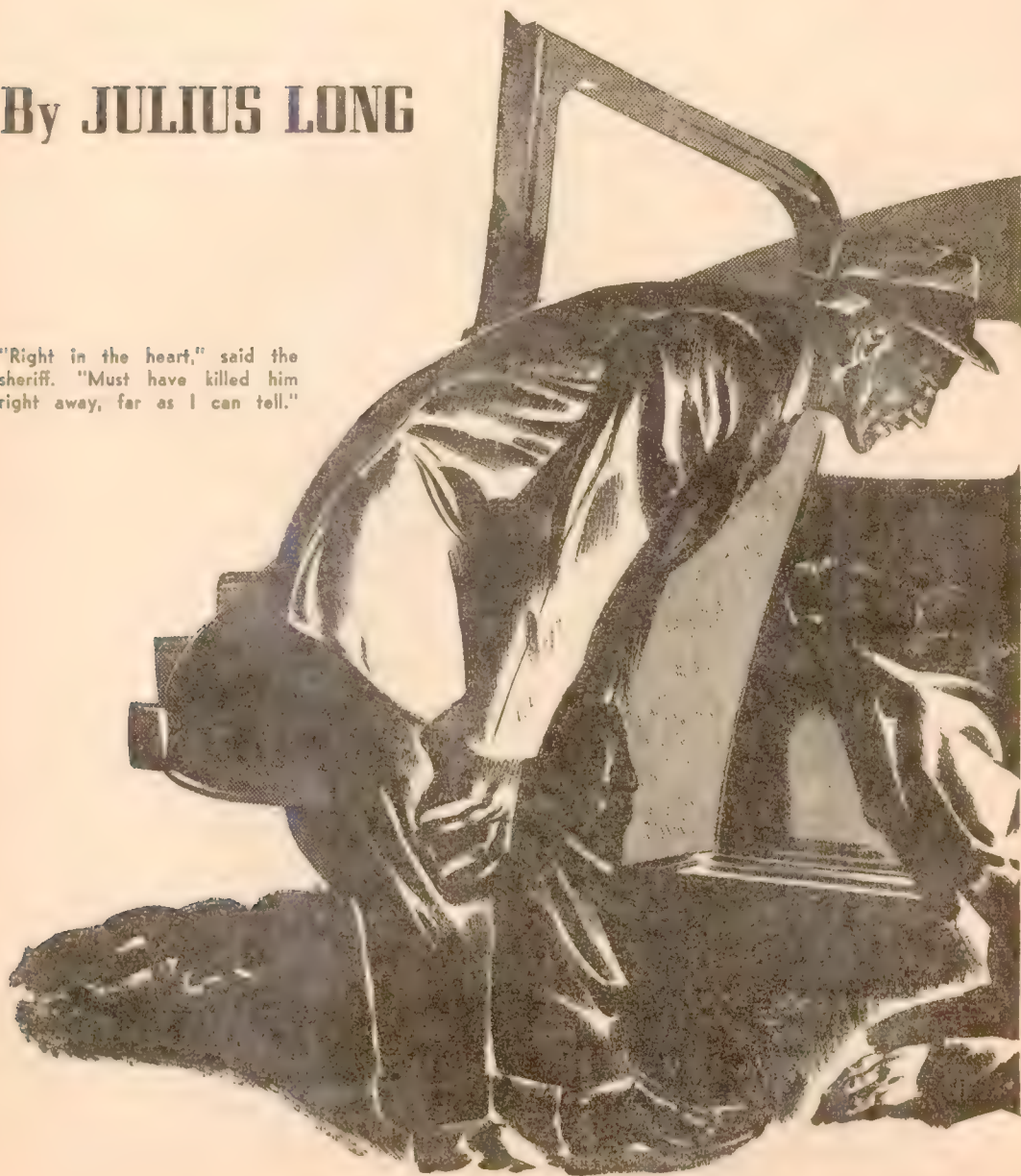
had escaped.

Suddenly an indignant lodger in the camp began protesting in angry tones that the police were disturbing his sleep. Just as the cops were about to apologize and withdraw, they recognized the complainant. His boldness had given him away, and the police left the camp that night with an escaped lifer who had been stopping overnight while on his way to Mexico! —L. Polk

THE CORPSE KEEPS COMPANY

By JULIUS LONG

"Right in the heart," said the sheriff. "Must have killed him right away, far as I can tell."



**The glamorous side of being a private
eye is exaggerated—but they do have brains!**

MAYHEW'S office was on the fifth floor. I felt very self-conscious as I entered. I don't think I had ever seen a private detective until a week before, and the fact that I was about to hire one gave me a feeling of unreality.

A woman with graying brown hair looked up from her typewriter desk.

"I want to see Mr. Mayhew."

"You don't have an appointment, do you?" She did not say it in a superior, curt manner. She said it regretfully and as if balked by unalterable fact. I



guessed that Mayhew was out of the office, possibly out of the city and that accordingly the woman knew that I couldn't have an appointment with him.

I felt like a fool. "No, you see I didn't make up my mind to come to the city until three hours ago. I hoped I'd catch Mr. Mayhew in."

"Well, that is a shame. Mr. Mayhew is out of town, and he won't be back for several days. But Mr. Snyder is here. I'm sure he can take care of your business. Won't you see him?"

I felt let down. It had taken some determination to make up my mind to invest in a private detective, and only my one contact with Floyd Mayhew had determined me. I wanted him or nobody at all. But the woman at the desk had not been placed there for nothing. She smiled ingratiatingly.

"Mr. Snyder is Mr. Mayhew's associate, and he actually handles nearly all of our work. I'm sure he has a moment right now if you've time to see him."

Well, I had time. I'd made a special trip. I let the woman show me into the private office, bracing myself against acquiescence. Just going in there had committed me to nothing. All I did was to give her my name, and she passed it along to the man in the pepper-and-salt suit. It irked me because he was younger than I was, but his greeting was disarmingly cordial.

"I'm sorry Mr. Mayhew is out of town, Mr. Grant, but I'll do my best. I think you'll find that older chair more comfortable. I use it myself when there's no client in the room. What do you think? A work of art, hey?"

I conceded that the chair was very comfortable. Neither its stuffing nor Snyder's smile was overdone. I suppose my long association with fictional detectives had given me the notion that I was going to encounter a freak instead of such a pleasing person.

"This is the first time I've ever been inside the office of a private detective, Mr. Snyder."

He laughed. "Yes, I noticed that you wore a look of some suspicion. I hope you aren't disappointed. So many people come in here expecting to see guns and blackjacks lying around. The fact is Miss Carlisle out there won't even let us bring a gun into the place."

HE LAUGHED again, at his own joke, and I laughed with him. The room was furnished about like my own, and that means it looked like about any lawyer's private office.

"I did want to see Mr. Mayhew," I said lamely. I knew then I was hooked.

"Sure, everybody does. My first job is making people accept me instead. The fact is—I know I can talk frankly to you, Mr. Grant, because you're a lawyer, and you know how it is—well, the fact is that Floyd Mayhew doesn't spend a half an hour in this office in a week!"

I nodded understandingly. "I see. He's out working on cases."

Snyder was sitting on the edge of his desk, and he slapped his thigh as he laughed loudly. I reddened.

"Come now, Mr. Grant, you know better than that! Where did you meet Mayhew, anyway?"

"It was at the Morrel City Country Club. I was out there for dinner, and a friend introduced me to him. That was only last week."

"Yes, I remember Floyd was up at Morrel City. But not working on a case. He was up there meeting people, people like you. It's funny how even lawyers are fooled about private detectives. Maybe the movies are to blame—they get the blame for everything else. They've always got private detectives going around and solving murders. Actually private detectives

are no different than lawyers. When they're running around, they're just trying to get clients."

I grinned a little wryly.

"I take it then that a successful detective like Mr. Mayhew is successful not because he solves cases but because he gets business."

"Exactly!"

"But that's a poor recommendation for this agency, isn't it?"

"Not to you, I hope, Mr. Snyder. If you weren't a lawyer, I wouldn't talk this way. You know as a lawyer that almost any lawyer can handle almost any law business, don't you?"

"Well, within certain limits."

"Within almost any limits. The successful lawyer is just an ordinary lawyer with a flair for bringing in the business. Now, it's the same way with us. Floyd Mayhew goes out, meets the right people and brings in the business. Any ordinary detective can do the work. That's what I'm here for. Now, what is the work you've brought us?"

"First, how'd you guess I was a lawyer?"

Snyder chuckled. "Haven't other people guessed it, too?"

"Sure, but—"

"But why shouldn't I? I'm as smart as other people. Now, this work?"

"Well, I've a client, too. She's a defendant in a lawsuit over a note and mortgage. The amount involved isn't so much, only three thousand dollars. My client has the note and mortgage in her possession, but the party suing her, the receiver for a wholesale house, claims she has no right to it. He says it's part of the assets of the receivership, and it was stolen from the company safe."

"Was it?"

"I DON'T know. My client says she paid out three thousand good

American dollars for the note in 1943. The wholesale house was hard-pressed for funds at the time, and they sold her this note which they'd taken from a customer. The exact date the transaction was supposed to have taken place on was August 7th."

"Don't the company's books show three thousand paid in at that time?"

"Yes, they do. But the note shows no endorsement, and the mortgage shows no assignment. Both my client and the officials of the company claim the transaction happened after business hours—it was a Saturday afternoon, and they neglected to take care of the endorsement and assignment."

"These officials—they had a right to sell the note?"

"No. But the court won't set aside the deal if the proof shows the company actually got the money. I know that, and so does the other side."

"Well, the books show they got the money, so what are you worried about?"

"Certain peculiar circumstances Nate Coon, the receiver's lawyer, is going to bring out. For example, the company kept right on collecting the interest on the note even after the time it was supposed to have been assigned."

"Force of habit, I suppose. The mortgagors are a young couple named Bartlett, and Bartlett was drafted some time before the mortgage was assigned. His wife got a job near the camp where he's permanently stationed. They'd always mailed their money order for the interest to the wholesale company, and they kept on doing it. The money orders were cashed, and the cash was paid to my client. Naturally there was no record of the transaction."

"Naturally."

"I know what you're thinking. It looks even worse when I tell you that the wholesale house was operated by

two first-cousins of my client. Nate Coon will argue that she loaned them the money to save their skins and that afterwards, when they knew they were about to fold up, they gave her the note and mortgage in payment."

"Have they any proof of that?"

"I don't think so, but if anybody can it's Jim Gooding, the receiver. He used to be the company's bookkeeper until a couple of years ago. He quit, he says, because he wouldn't stand for the things that were going on. I think the judge appointed him receiver because he was the only one who had a chance to figure out the slipshod books the boys kept."

Snyder gave me a puzzled look.

"Why do you think you need our services?"

"Whether Nate Coon and Jim Gooding can prove anything or not, I want to be sure that that transaction between my client and her cousins was on the level. It so happens that I'm engaged to marry my client."

Snyder said: "My God, you want to check up on your girl!"

"Oh, I know what you're thinking. It seems like a dirty trick to pull on a girl you're in love with. But I want to know."

"Suppose you find out your girl really is a crook and has cooked up this scheme to save her three thousand?"

"In that event I'll get out of the case and out of her life. Maybe I'm cold-blooded, maybe I've just had too much experience in the divorce court. I'm nearly thirty-eight, and I've practiced law since I was twenty-two. Every year I became more and more a professional bachelor and swore I'd never marry. I don't intend to marry a crook."

SNYDER eyed me steadily: "Mr. Grant, I think you should go right on being a professional bachelor."

"You're probably right."

"Look at it this way—suppose we investigate this matter and find out your girl is on the level. Then, years after you're married, she discovers what you did. Brother, your name would be Mudd!"

I sighed. "If you don't want to take the case, say so."

"We'll take it, but I'd rather not. I suppose you know it will be expensive. It may take weeks."

I got out a check-book. "If you're worried about money, I'll give you any advance you want."

Snyder named a figure, and I put it in a check.

"Will you handle this yourself?"

"No, but we've a fine man we can use."

"How soon will he start?"

"He'll get there some time tomorrow."

"He'll contact you?"

"Of course. He may spend a day or two looking around first, but he'll naturally come to you for a complete story. In the meantime, you can give me a few essential facts. What's the name of your client and her cousins?"

"Mary Carter. The cousins are Harry and Dave Burke."

"This receiver, you said his name was Jim Gooding?"

"Yes. He's come up since he left the Burkes. He's now secretary of our biggest building and loan."

"And his lawyer?"

"The dean of our local bar. His firm name is Coon & Forsythe."

Snyder took down a few more details, then I left. I was glad to get away from Snyder. He thought I was crazy, and I couldn't blame him. It had occurred to me many times that I was temperamentally unsuited for matrimony. Here I was, going out of my way to place an obstacle between myself and the girl I

loved. Maybe I didn't love her enough.

I stayed in River City that night. Perhaps I was ashamed to go to Millers-town and face Mary. One thing was certain—if she ever got an inkling of my hiring a detective agency to check up on her, my standing as a professional bachelor would be official.

At ten the next morning I started home. In Morrel City I had lunch. I took my time, and it was nearly two when I walked into my office. People were waiting, and work was piled up. I didn't even think about my personal problem until six, when I finally left.

THE thought hit me with a bang then, for Mary was sitting on a booth at the soda fountain below my office when I went inside. She smiled, and I felt like a heel.

"I've been waiting for you," she said. "Miss Sloan said you were awfully busy and wouldn't be through till late, but I did want very much to see you. It's really important."

"O.K." I drank a hasty coke, and we left. She had her car, but we left it and took mine. We drove out on River Road, where we always drove. It was beautiful out there, but neither of us were noticing it this time. I found the courage to face her.

"Well?"

"I want you to settle my lawsuit, George."

"I would if I could, but it can't be done unless we give in altogether."

"That's what I want to do. I want to give them back their note and stuff."

"Mary! Why—"

"I know what you're thinking. This may spoil things for us, but I want it to be this way. I can't go through with what Harry and Dave want me to. I don't blame them—they're only trying to save my three thousand for them. But I know from what you've told me

that it's all wrong. So I'll just give up."

"You mean what Nate Coon says is right, that Harry and Dave took the note out of the safe and gave it to you to cover up money you'd advanced to them?"

"That's it, George. But we don't have to tell Coon that, do we? Let's just say we're quitting."

It was still broad daylight, of course, but I stopped my car. Afterwards Mary said I was wearing more lipstick than she was. She also said that I was parked in the middle of the road. I cleaned the worst of the lipstick off and started on.

"I'll see Nate Coon in the morning," I said, "and tell him to fix up a journal entry dismissing his case. If he asks why I'll tell him it's just too hot to fight a lawsuit. Gal, you certainly have made me happy, leveling like that."

"I knew I would. If it hadn't been for you, I'd have listened to Harry and Dave. I'm afraid they won't like it, my giving up."

"The hell with Harry and Dave. So they embezzled that money, after all!"

"See? That's what people will think. That's why I say the boys won't like my quitting."

"They've got a lot of nerve to beef to you. After all, you dropped three grand keeping them out of jail."

SHE was still worried, I could see.

But I was up in the clouds and didn't think much of it. We drove till about a quarter after eight and would have burned up more gas only Mary reminded me she had to appear at a shower being given for Bee Parks. Her brother Sam was going to marry Bee. Everybody hoped it would settle him down.

I dropped Mary at her car, then drove down to the railroad telegraph office, the only one open at that hour.

I wired the Mayhew agency and told them I didn't need their help. I had left a pretty fair sized advance with them, and I hoped I'd get most of it back.

I wasn't hungry, but I killed a little time over food. Afterwards, I didn't know what to do with myself. The best place to do it was at the country club, where there was always a friendly game. There were five at the table when I sat in. One of them was Dave Burke.

Everybody knew that Dave and his brother were supposed to be broke, yet Dave always had plenty of money to play poker, even at The Turf Club, the county's hot spot. From time to time he would complain about this game being too slow. There was a general exchange of glances. There had been nasty talk about Dave steering club members to The Turf Club.

The game filled up when Nate Coon appeared accompanied by Jim Gooding. Gooding had gone far since quitting his job with the Burke brothers. Dave couldn't help resenting his presence, and a year before he had even tried to blackball him when his name came up for membership. It didn't help any when Jim lifted a couple of nice pots from Dave.

"You ought to confine your stealing to receiverships!" Dave said. No one at the table dared breathe until Gooding said easily: "Let's check our business differences, Dave. I think we all came here to relax."

I said: "We really haven't any differences, Jim. I may as well tell you—Mary's giving up the case."

Dave Burke stood up so quickly that he knocked over his chair.

"Damn you, George! This is your idea, I'll bet! I knew you'd hand Mary some bum advice!"

I'd never liked Dave or his brother Harry, the real drunkard of the pair.

Everybody at the table and I were pretending not to be listening. Nate was eyeing Dave with frank contempt.

"If you'll take my advice," he said coldly, "you'll be satisfied with staying out of jail."

Dave reddened. He started to reply, then compressed his lips and walked away from the table. I knew then that Nate had more on him than I'd thought. It was a decidedly unpleasant interruption to the game, but a few moments later everybody seemed to have forgotten it.

BY ELEVEN the boys had me hooked as usual, and I couldn't build up much interest in trying to recuperate. I was thinking of Mary. I excused myself, went to a phone and called Bee Parks' house. I asked for Mary.

"Can't you duck out?" I asked her. "Meet me down at the Stork Club in half an hour if you can."

She said she'd try so I headed for the Stork Club. Of course that wasn't its real name, just one we'd given it. Actually the place came pretty close to being a dive, but nobody in a small town seems ever to succeed with a nice bar. This one was run by Mike Kelley, and Mike's saving grace was that he kept some good drinking liquor hidden away for his friends. Mike broke out a bottle, and we downed a couple of doubles by the time Mary came along.

I had given her up. It was nearly twelve.

"So help me," she said, "I'll never go to another one! By the way, have you seen anything of my darling brother?"

"No, but then this is the first saloon I've made tonight."

Mary gave me a dirty look. Sam Carter was a good egg, but when it came to soaking up whiskey he was a human sponge. My guess was he had already

shot his share of the family inheritance and had begun to cadge drinking money from Mary. This was a serious item, as it took twenty dollars to give Sam even a glow. But then Bee Parks' family had money, and he would soon be off Mary's hands, an idea that had grown increasingly appealing to me.

"What's up?" I asked unwisely. "Why do you want to see him tonight?"

"Oh, it's nothing."

I let it go at that. We had a drink, and then we left Mike, for I wanted another drive. I thought maybe Mike's presence had tied Mary's tongue and asked her about Sam again when we were alone. She still said it was nothing. The moon was bright, and I dropped the subject.

It was a little after two when I delivered her again to her car. I drove home, which was the south wing of the big old place belonging to the Drummond family, which had seen better days. The garage was large enough for half a dozen cars, and I always used it, but tonight a car was parked in the drive.

I had never seen it before. I guessed that it belonged either to visitors of the Drummonds or their upstairs tenants. I didn't feel like pushing it out of the way, so I parked behind it. I crossed to the side entrance to my wing, then for some reason looked back. In the brightness of the moonlight I could see the man slumped over the wheel of the strange car.

The logical thing was to conclude that he was drunk, but I felt a tell-tale tingle. I walked warily toward the car. I stared inside the car a few moments. The man was not breathing. I turned back, entered my quarters and phoned the sheriff's office.

It was in the jail building, and so was the sheriff's residence. Somebody else answered, a trusty, I suppose, and he

was five minutes getting the sheriff to the phone.

At least it seemed that long before Abe Jeffers answered. Abe had been sheriff six years, but murders are few and far between in our county, so he got all excited when I said I thought the man in the car had been murdered.

Of course I didn't know. All I knew was that he was dead. But somehow the apparently innocuous events of the past few hours had prompted the thought. I walked back to the car and lighted a cigarette which I did not taste.

ABE got there in short order. When it comes to county sheriffs, I suppose Abe was about average. He had been elected not because of any suspected law enforcement abilities, but because he could be depended upon to keep the county from running too wide open and not to break out in a Cadillac or buy too many farms.

"I've phoned the coroner," he said. "Doc Barrett'd better look this guy over before I move him any. Was he just like this when you found him?"

"I didn't touch anything, not even the car."

"Well, that's fine. You done right. He sure looks dead all right." He stopped staring at the dead man and walked around to the rear of the car. "Them plates is from downstate. Hamilton County, I think."

The Mayhew detective agency was in River City, and River City was in Hamilton County. I tried to think of a good excuse for going back to the phone.

"Did you call the chief of police?" I asked Abe.

Abe lifted his bushy brows.

"Why, no. I supposed you had. I wish you would. We're hardly on what you'd call speaking terms, you know."

I did know. Abe and Al Godfrey,

the chief, had squabbled over the splitting of some graft a couple of years back and hadn't got along since. I said I'd phone Al and went into the house.

I did wake up the chief and tell him what was up. Then I called River City. I didn't know Snyder's last name, but when I told the operator he was connected with the Mayhew agency, she got him quick enough. He was in bed.

"I wouldn't have bothered you," I told him, "if it hadn't occurred to me that you have already sent a man up here on my case."

"We did."

"Was he driving a car with a plate numbered 596 WJ?"

"He was."

"Was he a sandy-haired man, about forty, ordinary build?"

"He was."

"He's dead."

"Where?"

"Practically on my door-step. He was slumped over the wheel of his car when I came home a little while ago. I've summoned the local authorities."

"That's all right, but don't tell them anything about Rocky. That was his name, Rocky Agnew."

"But won't his credentials show who he is?"

"Our men never carry credentials unless they carry guns, and Rocky wasn't carrying a gun."

"Well, the police can identify him by his auto tag."

"Sure, but not till the bureau of motor vehicles opens in the morning. In the meanwhile I'll be up there and handle the local cops. This is the agency's baby, and it's going to be taken care of our way."

"I feel responsible, too. After all, this man was practically working for me. Do you know if he'd found out anything?"

"No. I sent him up there last night,

that is, the night of the day when you were in my office. I thought it best to have him on the job even before you thought he would be. I got his first report in the afternoon's mail. He had spent the evening and half of the night with Dave Burke and Sam Carter, your girl's brother. They wound up at a place called The Turk Club. I suppose you know all about it."

"I've heard about it." The Turf Club was a few miles out of town and the source of a large slice of Abe Jeffers' graft. It was the place Dave Burke's name had been linked with.

"Well, Rocky hadn't much to say about the evening except that Dave Burke dropped a lot more cash than a man that's broke usually has. Rocky also met Dave's brother Harry and some girl. I don't have her name at hand, for the report's at the office. I'll get it before I come up to Millers-town."

"You got my wire?"

"Yes, but I wasn't going to phone Rocky till morning. Too bad I didn't try sooner."

"You think his death really has something to do with the Burke receivership case?"

"I don't think anything. You haven't said how he was killed."

"I don't know. The coroner hasn't arrived yet."

"Well, I'll be seeing you in two or three hours, maybe sooner if I can get a plane and pilot. Millerstown got an airport?"

"Sure, the best the Chamber of Commerce could buy. And it's got lights. If you can get a plane, wire or phone Ted Stone, the manager."

"Fine. Where'll I meet you?"

"My office is the best bet."

I HUNG up. The coroner pulled into the drive as I went outside I

counted on Doc Barrett being of real help. He read detective stories by the truck-load, and he had been complaining ever since he had been elected coroner because nobody had been murdered. Now he had his chance.

"You must of had quite a talk with the chief," Abe said suspiciously. I regarded Barrett, who was forcing his fat figure from his car.

"Murder's been done, Doc. It's in that car."

Barrett walked to the car and peered inside. Then he gently drew back the dead man's head so that it lay back against the top of the seat. Barrett whistled. I saw why. Agnew had been stabbed with a screw-driver. It was still there.

"Right in the heart!" said the sheriff, looking over our shoulders. "Must of killed him at once!"

Barrett shook his head. "Not necessarily. The absence of profuse external hemorrhage doesn't mean he died at once. It may mean that he lived some little time, even drove his car here, before he died of internal hemorrhage."

"How long has he been dead?"

"Can't tell. The body's still pretty warm, but it's a hot night."

"Well, Doc, you better get started on him."

Barrett turned away from the dead man. "I think I'll wait till Chief Godfrey gets here."

Jeffers didn't like the idea, but he couldn't complain. Al Godfrey arrived almost immediately. He was out of his customary uniform, and his shirt had been so hurriedly buttoned that one of the buttons was in the wrong hole. I walked over to my door and sat on a step while Godfrey went through the business of detecting.

He wasn't long joining me.

"What was this guy doing in your

drive?"

"Don't ask me. I never saw him before."

"You mean you don't even know who he was?"

"I mean just what I said."

"Well, he must of had some reason coming here."

"Maybe he had nothing to do with it. Maybe somebody else brought him here."

"That don't seem likely. Why would anybody bring him to your place?"

"Why say 'my place?' It's the Drummonds' place, and they've got people upstairs, the Goddard family. Maybe they can answer your questions."

"Maybe, but you're a lawyer, and people have more reason to call on you."

"I won't argue about that, but the fact remains that I never saw the man before in my life."

Al Godfrey gave me what he thought was a shrewd look.

"Maybe you've got something to tell me private when Jake isn't around. I've always been your friend. You know that."

I didn't know anything of the kind. I had never liked Al Godfrey. He was no more corrupt than Abe Jeffers, but while Abe was an easy-going, good-natured moron, Al's temperament was tintured with malice. I knew that his allusion to a fancied friendship meant that he felt that he had always done me a favor in letting me carry pistols and revolvers around.

I had a larger than ordinary collection. There wasn't any range in Millerstown, but I did a lot of shooting into a bank at the country club, and besides, I belonged to several ranges in surrounding cities. I usually had a satchel full of automatics in my car, and Al seemed to think I should

appreciate his not bothering me about them.

NOW he was going even farther. The smirk on his face suggested that the body in the car parked in my drive was highly incriminating. Of course he was my pal, so he'd cover up for me as much as possible. In the meantime I could be under obligation to him.

"Listen, Al, you can go milk a goat. I haven't anything to tell you or the sheriff. If either of you have any more questions to ask, you'll find me drinking coffee down at the Busy Bee."

I went out to my car, and nobody tried to stop me when I drove away. I had to laugh at the thought of the Drummonds and the Goddards being wakened up to look at a corpse and explain why they didn't know anything about him.

I kept on going toward the Busy Bee until out of sight from my place, then I cut across to Route 30, which was the way to The Turf Club. It was getting on toward three o'clock when I got there, but the place was still running full-blast. I found a place to park in the crowded lot and went over to the entrance.

There wasn't even a man there to watch it. I walked into a room filled with tables and chairs that nobody ever used. Some girls were playing slot machines which lined the walls. I had never been in the place before, but I knew that the gambling room lay beyond in the back of the building. Russ Parisi, who ran the place, lived upstairs with a blonde named Johnny May, whom he introduced as his wife.

The man sitting in a chair outside the door to the sucker parlor was unknown to me, and I was unknown to him. I gave him my name, and he stepped inside the door. Immediately

he reappeared with Parisi.

"Why, Mr. Grant, this is an unexpected pleasure! Glad to have you drop around! Come right on in, and we'll see that you get some action!"

I had never met Parisi. His glad-hand was owing to the fact that the proprietors of such establishments get so sick and tired of looking at the kind of people who hang around them that they are flattered to be patronized by anyone who looks as if he can defend himself.

Parisi took me through the room proudly, "mistering" me to death as he introduced me to the characters running each game and told them loudly that my credit was unlimited. Several people I knew were somewhat startled at my presence, and at last half a dozen of them had red faces. But not Sam Carter. He wore an amused look.

There was no space vacant beside him, but I awaited my chance and presently moved in at his left. I went through the routine of placing a small bet.

"Slumming?" asked Sam.

"No. I was pretty sure you would be here." The jargon of the dice game as well as the other noises in the room made our conversation private. I said: "A man has been murdered. You were with him last night. You and Dave Burke."

I SUPPOSE Sam's idea was preserve the outward calm that gamblers are supposed to have, and he did a fair job except for his deathly pallor.

"You're kidding."

"No. Were you with the man to-night?"

"Yes. But not for the last couple of hours."

"Where did you leave him?"

"I didn't. He left me, he and Dave."

"When?"

"I told you it was a couple of hours ago. We all got together at the Stork. Dave came in from the country club. He was plenty burned up at you."

"Did he say why?"

"Yes. I don't blame him. I'm going to tell Mary what I think about that. It's running out on Harry and Dave."

"So you came out here?"

"Yes. We ran into Harry, and when Dave told him what Mary was doing, he hit the ceiling."

"Harry left then?"

"Yeah. He didn't say where. I think he meant to see Mary, but she was at the shower. I knew he wouldn't bother her there, so I let him go."

"After this man left with Dave, did you stay here?"

"Yes."

"All the time?"

"What's it to you?"

"I'm only trying to keep you out of trouble—murder trouble. If you weren't Mary's brother I wouldn't bother."

"Well, you needn't. This guy was nothing to me. He was just a Joe Bankroll looking for action. Dave and I let him come along out here."

"How many others do you bring out here?"

Sam forgot that he had money on the table.

"What do you mean by that crack?"

"Anything you want to make of it. I know you're blamed well broke, yet you've got plenty of money to throw away here. Dave's in the same condition only more-so. I've noticed often lately at the country club that he complains often about the game being small-time and usually he talks three or four fellows into winding up here. Every time they lose heavily, but I've a hunch Dave's money is just stage money."

Sam reddened. "Well, you've got a

wrong hunch! Dave's no steerer, and if you're intimating that I—"

"Im not. But I think Dave's using you, and if you aren't careful people will think you're working as a pair."

"Just because you're going to be my brother-in-law doesn't make you my guardian."

"True, but that doesn't answer my question. Were you here all the time after Dave and the other man left?"

"Except for about fifteen minutes, that's all."

"Where were you then?"

"That's none of your business."

"The sheriff will make it his business."

Sam smirked. "That jerk couldn't put two and two together and get four."

I was on the verge of telling him that a man was coming up from River City who could, but I refrained.

"This man you and Dave picked up, what did he say his name was?"

"Wally Ewart. How did you happen to know he was with us?"

"That was it, I just happened to. Now, tell me, did he ask you or Dave any questions?"

"I don't know what kind of questions you mean. All he asked about was where he could throw down some money."

"Harry and a girl were with you for a while. Where was that?"

SAM started. He eyed me with something approaching respect.

"You do get around," he conceded. "I didn't know anybody knew about that. They were with us only a minute or so."

"Where?"

"At Harry and Dave's place. We stopped in there so Dave could pick up some liquor. Parisi won't sell any out here."

"I see. Harry had the girl at his

place when you walked in. Who was she?"

"That I'm not saying. It doesn't make any difference."

"It may make a lot. Did anything happen while you were there?"

"No. We got out as quick as we could."

"This man Ewart, he was with you?"

"Sure. The idea was we were all to have a drink before we left for here."

"Did Ewart say anything to Harry?"

"Nothing only the usual thing when they were introduced. The girl had an idea she'd met Ewarts before."

"Oh, she did? What did Ewarts think of that?"

"Not much. He handed her a line about how if he'd ever seen a blonde like her before he'd surely remember her."

"Oh, so she was a blonde?"

Sam frowned at his own slip and turned his undivided attention to the game. He had been throwing down money carelessly and losing without interruption. At that moment heads turned. My own turned in the general direction, and I saw the reason.

Johnny May Parisi wore an almost transparent sweater over a brassiere. It was as tight-fitting as her slacks. Her hair was swept up, and the right kind of chemicals had made it beautifully blonde. Her face was a perfect oval except for her chin which receded just a little. She took care of this fault by the way she managed her mouth, using a kind of smile that made you think the chin was just right.

She came over to Sam, put her arms around him so that she cupped his jaw in her hands. She pulled him back and bit his ear. Across the crap table Russ Parisi laughed lustily. Nobody paid much attention, and I gathered that Johnny May greeted many of the customers in the same manner. She eyed

me coyly.

"Aren't you going to introduce me to your friend, Sam?"

Sam muttered an introduction.

"You're a stranger here, aren't you?"

She made it sound like that was a shame.

"Yes," I told her, "this is my first offense. I wouldn't have been out tonight, only I thought Sam and you might like to know that the fellow he and Dave Burke brought out to Harry's place has been murdered."

Johnny May winced as if she had been slapped. Then she uttered a monosyllabic curse and strode from the room. Sam had been the recipient of the curse. His face was crimson. He glared at me.

"Damn, you, George! That was uncalled for! She'll say I told you! And Russ saw the whole thing. See, he's leaving the room now! A fine thing! He'll keep her up the rest of the night asking questions."

"You could have saved the scene by telling the truth. When there's a murder it usually outs."

"Don't excuse yourself to me! A lawyer always has a good excuse for everything he does, and I'm fed with listening to you. Get away from this table and let me alone!"

I LEFT him. If I had stuck with him like a leech he wouldn't have told me where he had been during those fifteen minutes away from The Turf Club. I doubted that he would even tell me the time of day. I figured that I had done my part, and that was that.

I reached my car, climbed under the wheel and turned on the lights. Then the right-hand door opened and closed. A slim figure had slipped into the seat beside me.

"Let's take a ride," said Johnny May. It was an order. There was

nothing to compel me excepting the way Johnny May twisted her smile to hide her slight deficiency of chin. I drove out of the lot and headed away from Millerstown.

I said mildly: "I thought you ran away mad."

"No," said Johnny May, "I wasn't mad. I was just in a hell of a hurry to get out of there before Russ could corner me and ask a lot of fool questions. He's a lip-reader, you know. He learned it in some hick pen out west."

"I didn't know that. I apologize for putting you on the spot."

"Oh, that's all right. The blow-off between Russ and me has been due a long time. Believe it or not, there wasn't anything between us, Harry Burke and me. We'd just stopped in at his place for a drink when those guys walked in. The stranger I knew I'd seen somewhere before. Where, I still can't remember, but I will. That's what I want to ask you about. Who was he?"

"He was a detective named Rocky Agnew. He worked for the Mayhew agency."

Johnny May clapped a hand to her mouth.

"That does it!"

"Remember where?"

"Uh-huh."

"Would you mind telling me?"

"I'll say! A girl's got to have a little privacy." She grew thoughtful. "So he got it, huh?"

"Indeed he did."

"A shooting?"

"No, a stabbing. With a screw-driver."

"The hell it was."

"You wouldn't have any idea as to who used it?"

"Why should I?" How come a private dick was working up in this neck of the woods anyway? And how come

you know all about it?"

"Answering your last question first, Agnew was killed in my drive, or at least it's the drive of the place I live in. As for the next question, I'll answer it by repeating your first one—why should I know?"

Johnny May gave me a twisted wry smile. She sat back in the seat and seemed to relax. An unpleasant thought occurred to me.

"I was a fool to drive you away from The Turf Club. If Parisi finds out he'll probably want to make something of it. I can't stand a scandal right now, as I'm going to be married. I—"

"Don't worry about Russ. He's got other worries right now. He drove into Millerstown like a bat out of hell. The fact that Agnew was out here two nights running before he got knocked off puts the club in the middle. It'll come out in the murder trial, and then the heat will be for Russ."

"Why did he drive into Millers-town?"

JOHNNY MAY gave me another twisted smile, which said I certainly knew the answer to that one. I thought I did. Parisi would be running to Abe Jeffers either for advice or to advise. My guess was the latter contingency. Plenty of people felt that the gambler actually ran the county.

I slowed, pulled into a farmer's lane and backed out again, turning my car around. Johnny May eyed me thoughtfully.

"Where are we going now?"

"Into Millerstown. You're going to tell your story to a man from the Mayhew agency."

If the use of profanity is an art, Johnny May was a superb artist. She actually didn't run out of words until we had passed The Turf Club. From there on in she sulked.

I parked in back of the building housing my office. I got out and opened the door for Johnny May. She didn't budge.

"What goes on? Where's the May-hew man?"

"Oh, he hasn't arrived yet. We can kill the time in my office till he does. It won't be long."

"I'm not going to your office or anywhere else with you. You can't do this to me. You're no cop."

I said wearily: "No, but Chief Godfrey is. Shall I turn you over to him?"

Johnny May brought out a new word. But she also got out of the car. She knew how Godfrey would smack his lips if he got his hands on one of the Turf Club people, especially Russ Parisi's girl. Parisi operated outside the city limits, so that made him the chief's enemy. So Johnny May went along as I used the back stairs to my office building.

I have the side of the building next to the alley, and my private office is next to the rear room, which is the library. Two windows put light into the alley as I snapped the switch, but I drew the shades. Johnny May eyed me with some suspicion.

She must have been reassured by my grin, for she relaxed. I noted that the clock on my desk said half-past three. Even if Snyder had been lucky enough to catch a plane, that would take time, and he was hardly due. But I told Johnny May:

"He'll be here any minute. Shall I get you a magazine?"

She shook her head. She began to inspect the room with the thoroughness of a cat. An alley cat.

Her gaze came to rest on a bottom drawer of my desk.

"You couldn't break out a drink?"

I could and did. We'd just polished off a couple of pretty husky shots when

there was a knock on my side door. I knew it couldn't be Snyder, so I figured it was the sheriff or the chief. There was no point in sitting quiet like a little mouse, so I went over and opened the door.

Mary walked in.

I got out an introduction, not stuttering much worse than Joe Frisco. Mary took it coolly.

"I suppose you're connected in some way with that awful murder," Mary said to Johnny May.

Johnny May gave her an especially twisted smile.

"How'd you guess?"

MARY gave her no answer, but she looked at me in a way that indicated Johnny May was the kind of woman who could be expected to be mixed up with murder. I couldn't think of a word to say. Telling Mary the murdered man was the detective I'd hired to check up on her would knock the wedding bells right out of the belfry. And I couldn't explain Johnny May without telling the whole story.

"You're kind of stingy with your liquor, aren't you, George?"

Before I could answer, Mary crossed and poured herself a stiff drink. I got her a chaser, and she put down the liquor like a gentleman.

"How'd you find out?" I asked.

"I called your place to say goodnight just before I turned in. Chief Godfrey answered. He told me what had happened. He seemed very indignant because you had run away. I thought maybe you'd be here. Naturally I couldn't sleep a wink until I heard everything from you."

"Naturally."

I didn't dare to look at Johnny May. I knew she would be taking it all in and wearing that twisted smile. She couldn't know how big a jam I was in,

but she could guess pretty close.

"Suppose," she said coily, "you tell Miss Carter all about the murder. Then she won't have to ask you any questions."

I shot her a murderous look. I had my mouth open to start talking, without having the remotest idea of what I was going to say when there was another rap on the door. This time I would have been glad even if it had been Godfrey or Jeffers. However, it was neither.

"That was quick," I told Snyder. "You must have flown."

He nodded as he walked in. He eyed Johnny May and Mary, and I introduced them.

"Johnny May is a witness," I said. "You can talk to her while I see Mary to her car."

Mary wanted to stay, but she didn't have a chance. I'd have carried her out if she hadn't accepted the ultimatum of my firm grip on her arm. She wanted to know all about Snyder. She knew he had to be a detective, but what kind of detective was he? Had the sheriff or the chief hired him? Why had he come to my office, and what about Johnny May. No, of course she didn't think what I thought she might be thinking, but still, at the same time, just what the hell was Johnny May doing there at that time of the night?

I didn't try to give her any answers.

"I'll explain it all in the morning, darling. In the meanwhile go home and get some sleep."

I got my point over by opening the door of her car, picking her up and placing her under the wheel. Then I slammed the door on her and walked away. She made the tires skid as she gunned the motor in getting away.

Snyder and Johnny May were in full session when I got back. Snyder was putting down answers in a little black

book. Johnny May gave him the same story she had given me. When the questioning was over, Snyder spent a couple of minutes reviewing his notes. He eyed Johnny May intently.

"You say this Harry Burke meant nothing to you, that there was nothing at all between you?"

"Absolutely nothing."

Snyder twisted around so that he faced me.

"Mr. Grant, will you please describe Harry Burke for me."

"Well, I'm no good at describing people. Harry was pretty ordinary looking, only lately the liquor had been showing on him. His face looked bloated. He was developing a paunch. You could tell it in his eyes, too. He looked a lot older than the thirty he was."

SNYDER swung back to Johnny May.

"You heard Mr. Grant. Burke was no bargain for looks, and he was broke. I believe your story that there was nothing between you and Burke. But I can't think that your visit was only casual. Would you like to tell me why a very attractive girl like yourself was wasting your time with Burke?"

Johnny May started. Then she shrugged.

"I told you once, I just stopped in for a drink. Harry had been at the club, and we'd gone out for a little air."

"Where was Parisi when you left?"

"He was asleep in his office. He always sleeps early in the evening."

"I see. You got back before he woke up."

"Yes."

Snyder turned to me and laughed shortly as if the thing were wrapped up.

"There's your motive! The girl admits she knew Agnew had spotted her.

She guessed he was a detective. She was afraid he would report to Parisi about her being at Burke's place. So she either killed Agnew or got Burke to do the job."

I was considerably disappointed in Snyder. I shook my head.

"But, Mr. Snyder, that doesn't make sense. In the first place, Johnny May didn't have to tell me or you either that she had spotted Agnew as someone she had known before. And in the second place, Agnew was killed tonight. He had all of last night and today to report to Parisi. Anyone thinking he was working for Parisi wouldn't wait till tonight."

Snyder eyed me thoughtfully.

"True, Mr. Grant, but there is also the possibility that the pair decided Agnew was working on some other matter that would eventually be exposed in court and in the newspapers. Then his visit to Burke's while Johnny May was there would come to light. In that case they could afford to wait till tonight to kill Agnew, sure that they had plenty of time."

"Well, I still can't buy your theory."

Snyder shrugged. Johnny May was looking at me with another of her twisted smiles as if to say my defending her was too good to be true, and I wasn't fooling anybody but myself. Then Snyder said:

"There's still another motive. Johnny May identified Agnew as a detective who knew about an unpleasant phase of her past. She could have killed him to cover it up."

Johnny May stood up. "Listen, you, I've taken all I'm going to take! It's nobody's business where I first met Agnew, but I certainly wouldn't walk across the street to keep it out of the papers or even off the radio."

"Then why don't you tell us about it?" I asked.

Johnny May gave me a half-friendly look, then said stubbornly:

"It's still nobody's business." She was on the verge of tears and furious about it. "I'm leaving here," she said. "If I answer any more questions it'll be to the cops."

SHE walked out by the side door, and neither Snyder nor myself made any effort to stop her, though I did step into the corridor and ask her if she had a way home. Without turning back, she told me to go to hell.

Snyder wore a cold, unfriendly expression when I turned back into the room. He reached into his inside pocket and produced a check. He handed it to me.

"This is the advance you left with us, refunded in full. Agnew had put some time and incurred some expenses on your case, but we're not charging you with this one. It's on the house."

I accepted the check.

"I think I understand. You don't want any strings tied to your investigation. You think I may be the killer, and you would prefer that I shouldn't have the status of a client."

"That is a possible but not probable contingency. The main reason for the refund is that we wish to carry on this investigation in our own way. Perhaps I should have made that clear during our telephone conversation. I would have, if I had ever thought you would take it upon yourself to go out to The Turf Club and do some amateur sleuthing."

I felt my face getting red.

"Well, after all, I think I accomplished quite a lot! I found out who the girl was Agnew had mentioned."

"Remarkable. As I told you, the information was in his report."

Let down, I had enough curiosity to

ask: "Did he say where he had seen her before?"

"No. Perhaps he never had. She could have spotted him without his seeing her."

"You really think she's been in some serious trouble that she wanted to conceal?"

"No."

"Then why did you pretend that she did?"

"I had to think up some motive when you pointed out the inconsistency of my theory that she or Burke had killed Agnew before he could tell tales to Parisi. I knew the idea was absurd without your butting in."

This time I knew my face was red.

"Well, why did you want to accuse her if you didn't think she had anything to do with it?"

"I'm not saying she didn't have anything to do with it. I'm only saying the motives I supplied are not the real ones. I wanted to frighten the girl into telling the truth about why she went out for a ride with Harry Burke and later stopped at his house."

"Why are you so sure there is another reason?"

"Because she's too clever a girl to try to pull a fast one on a man like Parisi. She said he was asleep in his office, that she got back before he had awakened. But there are always a couple of stooges around a place like that eager to cover themselves with glory by running to the boss with a story."

"Then you think Parisi knew all the time that she was out with Burke?"

"Of course. He probably sent her, just as he must have told her to pick you up tonight and find out what the score was. You were kind enough to tell her, even tell her that the Mayhew agency was on the case. The odds are that the sheriff knows about it by this

time. You might as well have put it in the papers."

I WALKED to a chair and sat down.

"I guess I've been a fool. I'm sorry."

Snyder laughed a little embarrassedly. "Oh, that's all right. I'd probably have gone to the sheriff by morning myself. I did want to wait till Mayhew got here."

I straightened. "Floyd Mayhew's coming here?"

"Of course. He doesn't like it when one of his men is murdered. Neither do I."

"Nor I—I mean I feel that the man was working for me. Have you made up your mind as to whether his murder is connected with the investigation?"

"I'm jumping at no conclusions. But the odds are against coincidence."

"I thought maybe some old enemy might have followed Agnew up here. He'd been a detective several years and must have made a lot of enemies."

"We're checking that angle, too."

"Well, I hate to say it, but it does seem that the Burke brothers are the Number One suspects."

"Why?"

"Because they were guilty of stealing that note and mortgage out of the company safe and turning it over to Mary. She told me so early this evening. That's why I sent you that wire. We're turning the stuff back and giving up the case."

"That's interesting. Anybody know this?"

"Several people by now, including Dave Burke. He was out at the country club playing poker when I told Nate Coon we were quitting. It made him so mad he left the game."

"What time was that?"

"At about eight or eight-thirty. I'm not sure."

"Tell me more about how you spent the evening."

I told him, glad I had an alibi. Snyder put it all in his little black book. Then he stood up.

"Let's go find the coroner and the chief of police."

We found Al Godfrey in his office at the city building. He was startled when I introduced Snyder as a man from Mayhew's. The look he gave to me indicated that he thought I had hired the agency to investigate the murder at my door-step. He seemed relieved.

"I'm glad you're in on this deal, Mr. Snyder. Fact is, I was thinking about asking the city council to make an appropriation to hire your agency. But now that George's done it, I won't have to."

"Mr. Grant hasn't retained us," Snyder said smoothly. "The dead man was one of our investigators. We are handling this on our own."

Al Godfrey pricked up his ears.

"One of your men! Was he up here working on a case?"

"Yes."

"Well, what was it?"

I HELD my breath while Snyder lighted a cigarette. Then he said: "A private citizen whose name I am not at liberty to disclose had retained us to make an investigation of gambling in the county." As Godfrey paled, Snyder added quickly: "I mean in the rural section of the county outside the city limits. It was the sheriff's office that was under fire, Chief Godfrey, not yours."

Al Godfrey breathed a sigh that could have been heard on the public square.

"Well, to be frank with you, Mr. Snyder, I've been expecting something of the kind. Places like The Turf Club are just too much for the public to put up with! Why, in that case, Abe

Jeffers could have done it himself!"

The idea seemed to dazzle Al. Snyder said casually:

"Of course, I'll expect you to keep this information confidential. Of course you'll have to reveal Agnew's name—it was Rockland 'Rocky' Agnew—and the fact that he was an employee of the Mayhew agency, but you can tell the sheriff and the press that Agnew just happened to be passing through town."

Al nodded wisely. "You can count on me!"

"Now, I wonder if I could have a talk with the coroner?"

"Of course. I'll take you right over. He should be through with the autopsy by now. I expect the sheriff's over there, too. He's got a stronger stomach than I have."

Snyder and I exchanged a glance on that. The three of us walked to Doc Barrett's office. He was already writing his report when we got there. Abe Jeffers was looking slightly green. He looked even greener when I told him Snyder was from Mayhew's. He was afraid to ask questions.

"You'll find the murder weapon in that box," said Barrett, indicating a cardboard box. "You'll have a devil of a time tracing it. It's the kind sold all over the country in dime stores. Only this one was filed sharp. That proves premeditation."

Snyder examined the screw-driver.

"I was going to have it sent down to the River City police headquarters for a finger-print check-up," said Jeffers, showing he missed no bets.

"Listen, you," said Al Godfrey, "this is my jurisdiction. I'll send that thing in!"

"Don't bother," said Snyder. "That handle can't pick up a print, and neither can the stem."

Snyder killed the rest of the time

while Barrett finished his report in looking over the medical library. When Barrett did finish he handed the document to Snyder without hesitation, and neither Godfrey nor Jeffers complained. Snyder read it carefully and handed it back.

"I'd like a copy. It seems very complete. So you think death took place instantaneously?"

"In a matter of seconds. The lesion in the pulmonary artery was severe, probably because of the shape of the screw-driver blade."

"Then he couldn't have driven into the alley and died after he'd been stabbed somewhere else?"

"Oh, no. I can't say definitely how long he'd been dead when I performed the post-mortem, but I think he must have been stabbed shortly before George found him."

"I see."

SO DID I. Until that moment I'd never doubted that I had an alibi, but now it looked as if I'd had a better opportunity to kill Agnew than anyone else. He wouldn't have been on the guard against me, and I could have handled him easily. Of course Snyder couldn't supply me with a motive—yet.

"I wonder, Chief," said Snyder, "if you'd round up a couple of fellows for me—the brothers Burke. I believe they're well known in Millerstown."

Al was out of his chair like a jack-in-the-box.

"Sure! I'll round 'em up in no time!" Harry and Dave spend so much time at Parisi's place that Al was sure there was a connection. I thought I understood Snyder's request. He wanted the chief out of the way so he could talk to the sheriff. But he wasn't quite through at the coroner's.

"Might I see the contents of the pockets? I suppose you have them."

Barrett nodded. Everything was in a manila envelope. Snyder inspected the contents without enthusiasm. He put everything back into the envelope.

"You didn't see anything of a little black book?"

"No. It's all in there, what I found."

Snyder turned to the sheriff.

"I'd like a talk with Sam Carter."

We drove to the old Carter homestead in the sheriff's car. En route, Snyder handed Jeffers about the same line he had handed Godfrey, only in reverse. Agnew had been in Millerstown investigating the gambling within the city limits. Jeffers' sigh was even deeper than Al's. He pointed out that school children were spending all their nickels in slot machines inside the city limits while all he tolerated outside was a friendly game for those who could afford it. I decided that Snyder had been wrong in guessing that Johnny May's information had been passed on to Jeffers.

Sam's convertible was parked in the drive. There was room enough in the garage for half a dozen cars, but Sam was always too tired or too lazy or too drunk to drive into it. This time he was in none of the conditions mentioned. He was dead.

He was lying forward on the steering wheel much as Agnew had lain. Snyder eased him back. This time the job had been done with a larger screw-driver than that which had killed Agnew.

"Better drive back and get the coroner," said Snyder, and Jeffers was willing. When he had gone, Snyder turned to me. "It's up to you, I suppose, to tell his sister."

I nodded. I walked up the front steps and rang the bell. After while Mary came to the door. She pulled back the curtain, saw me and opened up.

I got it over with.

Persuading her not to go out to see Sam was even harder. I sent her back upstairs to dress and joined Snyder.

"Got any ideas?"

"One you won't like. You've got to come clean with your girl and tell her why Agnew was sent up here."

"I was afraid that was coming. Isn't there some other way?"

"No. This second kill definitely links Agnew's death with the lawsuit over the note and mortgage. Your girl's got to tell us everything she knows about it."

"But she has—that is, she told me how the Burkes talked her into the deal and how she couldn't go through with it."

"Still, I think you'd better tell her about Agnew."

HE MEANT that if I didn't he would. Waiting for Mary to come downstairs must have been like waiting for death in an electric chair. She appeared minutes before I expected her. I led her to a verandah swing and told her who Agnew was and why he had come to Millerstown.

"I'm sorry," I wound up lamely. "My only excuse is that I've never trusted Dave or Harry, and I thought perhaps they had talked you into something. You'll have to admit I was right about that."

Until then, Mary had taken it pretty well. She leaped out of the swing, spun on me and said:

"So you thought I was a crook! So you had to hire a detective to check up on me! Now Sam's dead! It's all your fault—I blame nobody else but you!"

She ran into the house and slammed the door behind her. Snyder climbed the verandah steps.

"Well, you asked for it."

For a moment I could have hit him. Then Snyder went on talking.

"The idea was to get her story. You didn't get it. Better go in there and patch things up."

"Just like that, uh?"

"Oh, it'll take a little diplomacy, I'll grant. But it has to be done."

"The hell it has. I'm washed up, and I know it."

Snyder shrugged. "If you don't get her story, I will."

He sounded tough about it. I reminded him: "I guess the local lawmen can handle the situation. Mary will be glad to talk to either the sheriff or the chief when they get around to asking her."

"I don't intend to wait that long. I don't have to tell you that Godfrey and Jeffers are both tickled to death to have the Mayhew agency working for free on this case. They'll do about anything I tell them and the first thing I'll tell them is to turn Mary Carter over to me."

His tone puzzled me. "What makes you think Mary's story is so important. Personally, I don't think she knows anything."

Snyder said: "Sit down a minute." We both sat down on the verandah steps. "Now, Mr. Grant, I don't like to be blunt, but the fact is that what you think in this matter doesn't mean a whole lot to me. But I do respect the fact that we did bear the relationship of investigator and client. If that weren't the case, I'd never tell you why your girl's story is so important to me."

He let that sink in, and I waited.

"Your girl is the Number One suspect on my list."

That sank in very quickly. I started to speak, then had to clear my throat before I could say: "You can't mean that!"

"I do."

"But—but you're saying she could have killed her own brother!"

"I know that sounds unthinkable to you, but let me explain why I've felt your girl was the chief suspect all along. You probably don't have any idea of how a private detective agency operates. You probably think we solve cases by accumulating clues until the jig-saw puzzle of mystery fits together. Well, we don't work like that at all. It would take too long. We've got to work fast.

"We do that by looking over the ground and deciding who probably knows all the answers. Sometimes we may pick out several people. Sometimes we're pretty sure one man has all the answers we need. Then we go to work on that man. We dig up something out of his past or present, something he can't afford to have exposed. Then we tell him the price of our silence is the answers we need. Always we get the answers. Then we've got plenty of time to accumulate the clues."

I said: "Why, that's blackmail! You're telling me you operate by blackmail!"

SNYDER shrugged. "I wouldn't know. Nobody's ever had us indicted for it, so I can't tell you whether we're technically guilty of any crime. All I know is that that's the way every private investigating agency in the country operates. Knowing that, you should be able to guess what Agnew was doing up here.

"He was working on someone, probably the Burke brothers. He hadn't had much time, but it's just possible he got enough on one of the brothers to force him to spill the works on that note and mortgage case. It had to happen yesterday or last night, for it wasn't in Agnew's first report.

"My guess is that it happened late in the afternoon. Conscience-stricken, the man who spilled it got in touch with your girl. He told her what he had

done, that the jig was up. So your girl does the smartest possible thing. She contacts you and tells you she's decided to drop her case. You think she's wonderful and honest, but she's only beating the receiver, Jim Gooding, and his lawyer, to the punch.

"Understand, that's only a hypothesis. Let's also suppose that your girl discovers that instead of Agnew being employed by Jim Gooding he's employed by you. She could have found that out in two ways. The first one was when you rushed to the telegraph office to pull us off the case. The second was when your girl drove home after you dropped her at your car tonight. She could have spotted Agnew's car. She goes by your place on her way, and she'd have been told the number on Agnew's car.

"So she pulls into the drive behind Agnew, fishes a screwdriver out of the glove box, walks up to Agnew and smiles as she lets him have it. Then she gets away before you come along. What do you think of that?"

"I think it's fantastic. The screwdriver had been sharpened. She wouldn't have time to do that."

"Lots of screwdrivers are sharpened to fit small screws."

"But why would she kill Sam?"

"Suppose Agnew hadn't worked on the Burke boys, but Sam instead. Sam would enjoy his sister's confidence. When he learns about Agnew's murder, he tells his sister that she has gone too far, that he is going to expose her. So she lets him have it, too."

I thought it over. The idea of Mary killing a man so I couldn't find out she had been forced to withdraw from the lawsuit still seemed fantastic. Besides, I just didn't think her capable of anything like that. But I was in love with her. Snyder wasn't. I knew that his notion, however fantastic it seemed to

me, was one he would concentrate on till a better one came along. I made up my mind then and there that I was going to find a better one.

I got up from the steps.

"I think you're nuts, Snyder. If you think you can hang this on Mary, go right ahead. Talk to her, give her a third-degree, if you like. See what you get out of it."

Snyder smiled wily. "Now you're mad at me. That's what I get for taking you into my confidence.

I relaxed a little. "I'm sorry I sounded that way. I appreciate your telling me what you have. It's just that I love the girl, and it gets me to have anyone say she could have committed a murder—or two of them!"

Snyder nodded understandingly, then he also got up, for the sheriff's car was coming into the drive. A few seconds later Doc Barrett pulled up behind him. I turned to Snyder.

"I don't know anything, but if anyone wants to ask any questions, I'll be at my office. I don't want to go home tonight."

SNYDER said nothing as I walked away. I went two blocks out of my way going downtown because I didn't want to pass my place. I climbed the dark stairway to my office, walked on down the hall to my private room and unlocked the door. I had been pretty particular about locks and had replaced the old ones with new, expensive modern ones. It was therefore a shock when I stepped inside and smelled the fresh cigarette smoke.

The tiny burning blob was behind my desk. I switched on the light. Johnny May sat in my swivel chair, her high-heeled slippers on the polished surface of my desk. I closed the door, which locks itself, and crossed to my desk.

"How did you get in here?"

"Doors never stop me."

"Why did you come here?"

"I had a hunch you'd hole up here for the night. I want to talk to you."

"About what?"

"About these killings. I was with Russ when the sheriff tipped him that Sam had got it, too. So I slipped out and drove in to town. I don't like killings."

"Do you know anything about these?"

"I'm not sure. There's wheels within wheels. But I've got a hunch that speaking my piece might help."

"Go right ahead and speak it."

Johnny May opened her mouth, then she twisted it and stared behind me. I turned. Russ Parisi stood in the doorway. I had not heard him open it. I wondered why I had ever bothered to have locks put on the doors.

"Pardon my intrusion, Mr. Grant," said Parisi. "I saw you come into the building, and I've been wanting to have a talk with you. I guess I wasn't the only one to have the same idea."

I turned to Johnny May. "That's a lot of hop. He knew you were here, and his only purpose in being here is to keep you from talking. Don't be afraid of him. If you know anything about these murders, tell it."

"Sure," said Parisi easily, "what was it you were going to say, Johnny May?"

Johnny May twisted her mouth around, got her feet off my desk and her bottom out of my swivel chair. She started for the door. Parisi caught her arm and yanked her back. He spoke to me without looking at her.

"Listen, you, there's nothing I've got to hide! I came here, like I said, to talk. I didn't know Johnny May'd got the same idea. If you think I've any reason to hold out on a murder deal, you're crazy. This thing's in my hair.

If it isn't cleaned up in short order the heat will be on so bad in this county I'll have to close the club for good. Especially since my place is tied up with both murders."

I said: "I'm listening."

"I'm talking only to that dick from Mayhew's. I figured I could reach him through you."

I **CROSSED** to my phone, dialed Mary's number. I waited for an answer while Johnny May wrenched loose from Parisi, sat down in one of my leather chairs and threw a leg over the armrest. After about thirty seconds Snyder himself answered. I didn't bother to ask him what he was doing in the house, for I had expected him to be there. But I asked:

"Where's Mary?"

"Upstairs dressing. I haven't questioned her yet."

I told him about my nocturnal callers. I suggested that he postpone his interview with Mary and come right down. He said he would be right down.

We sat there wordlessly while we waited. Ten minutes passed before there was a knock at my door. I opened it. Mary was the first person to step inside. Jeffers followed, then Snyder. I had to go out into the reception room to get two more chairs. Mary wouldn't look at me as I held a chair for her. I introduced Snyder to Parisi. Then he took over.

"O.K., Parisi, let's have it."

"I'll make it short. Johnny May was at Harry Burke's place because I sent her. I was paid to send her. That is, I was to be paid well if she came through with what the guy wanted.

"He wanted something on Harry Burke. He wanted enough on him to make him go to Mary Carter and get her to give up the fight over that note and mortgage that's in court. This guy

knew Harry had a weakness for Johnny May. He also had a weakness for drinking liquor. So I turned Johnny May loose on Harry Burke.

"It didn't take her long. Harry was a soft touch. After Dave and this detective had left Johnny May got him dead drunk. Then she went through the papers in his safe. It was the kind of a safe that opens almost by itself. Johnny May took enough stuff to hang Harry.

"It seems he had been double-crossing his brother all along. Say, a guy owed the outfit a grand. Harry would play around with the account for a while and finally tell Dave the thing to do was to settle it for fifty cents on the dollar. Actually he would settle for seventy-five per cent and pocket the difference. So—"

"That doesn't make sense," said Snyder. "If Harry Burke had collected the full thousand instead of taking a discount, his partnership share would have been as much as the amount he was pocketing."

"It makes sense," explained Parisi, "the way things were going. The outfit was in the red. All the money the boys took in had to be applied to debts. So Harry got his share without putting it on the books. He'd been doing it for the past two years, ever since Jim Gooding walked out as bookkeeper."

Snyder said: "What did you do with the stuff Johnny May took from the safe?"

"Turned it over to the guy who hired me."

"Who was that?"

Parisi hesitated, then shrugged.

"Nate Coon, the lawyer for the other side. I supposed you'd guessed that by this time!"

For a moment I couldn't believe it. Snyder took it in his stride. He turned to Jeffers.

"Bring me Coon."

Jeffers left. Snyder went to my phone and asked for the book. He got his number and dialed it. I knew he had called the chief's office, for he said:

"Have you picked up the Burke boys yet?" Then he said: "Fine, bring them right over." When he had hung up, I turned to Mary.

"Is that why you dropped the lawsuit, because Harry Burke told you he'd go to the penitentiary if you didn't?"

Mary dropped her eyes. Snyder said: "Skip it, Mr. Grant. All the answers are on their way."

THE Burkes arrived pretty promptly. I gathered from the looks of Harry that Godfrey had awakened him from a sound drunk. He stared sullenly while Dave gave me the full benefit of a glare that plainly indicated that I was to blame for all this.

Snyder asked them no questions, explaining to Al Godfrey that he was waiting on the sheriff to bring Nate Coon. I watched Harry's face, but his stare was unchanged by the news. A half hour passed before steps sounded in the hall. I opened the door and saw that Jeffers had not brought Nate alone.

Jim Gooding was with him. Jeffers explained: "Nate insisted that I bring Jim. It took time to get him up."

Nate eyed me fiercely and growled: "George, are you to blame for getting me up at this ungodly hour? What's the meaning of this?"

"Yes," chimed in Jim Gooding, "what's the idea?"

I ignored the questions, apologizing only because there was room for no more chairs. The newcomers had to stand behind the Burke brothers and Godfrey. Snyder introduced himself to Nate and briefly told him why he had been awakened in the middle of the

night. Nate began to redden. When Snyder told him that Sam had been stabbed, he paled. By the time Snyder had finished, he was shaking. Snyder demanded:

"Is Parisi's story true, or isn't it?"

"It's true, and it's not true!" Nate faltered. "It's true that I offered to pay Parisi if he could get something that would make Miss Carter give up her case. But I didn't mean to imply that I wanted something to blackmail Harry with. All I wanted was some direct evidence that that note and mortgage deal had been phoney!"

"But you did accept the evidence that Harry had defrauded his brother?"

"Certainly! It also proved he had defrauded the creditors as well. I counted on bringing another suit for the receiver. I think Harry's probably got a sockful of money hidden away somewhere. It's money that the creditors should have!"

"Then you didn't contact Harry Burke or threaten him?"

"No, of course not!" Nate turned to me. "George, I appeal to you to accept my professional word. Whatever made your client drop her case, I had nothing to do with it!"

I said: "I believe you, Nate."

He looked grateful. Snyder eyed Jim Gooding.

"You had the evidence, too. Did you threaten to expose Harry Burke if he didn't cause Miss Carter to drop her suit?"

Gooding eyed him coldly. "I did not. I haven't talked to Harry in weeks."

Snyder regarded Harry, who had listened to everything with his unchanging sullen stare.

"That's right?"

Harry's lips hardly moved. "That's right. I haven't even seen Jim for a week."

Snyder spun around toward Mary.

"All right, Miss Carter, it's up to you! If you want to help us find out who killed your brother, now's your chance. Why did you tell your lawyer to drop your case?"

MARY wouldn't look at me. She shot a glance at Harry, who averted her gaze, then said resignedly:

"Harry told me that if I didn't give back the note and mortgage, he'd go to prison."

Dave Burke was out of his chair. He glared down at his brother.

"Why, you cheap crook! You really were stealing from me all the time! Then you even sold out Mary to cover up!"

Harry stared at the floor.

"What else could I do? When the papers were missing out of the safe I knew they had me. I figured if Mary dropped out of the Bartlett mortgage case, that would satisfy them."

Snyder asked. "Then neither Nate Coon nor Jim Gooding had anything to do with your appealing to Mary Carter?"

"No."

I said: "Well, there you are. There can be only one answer. Your man Agnew, discovered the truth from Harry Burke. So did Sam. Neither Agnew nor Sam would have kept still. So both had to be eliminated."

"That's right," Dave Burke chimed in, "we were all together this evening. Harry was drunker than usual. He must have let the truth slip." He faced his brother again. "I hope they fry you, Harry! So help me, I want to be there!"

Snyder turned to Al Godfrey.

"Take him out of here and lock him up, Chief."

Al Goldfrey came forward.

"Are you going to come quiet, Harry,

or do I have to put the cuffs on you? You know what it would look like if you tried to make a break."

Harry got up docilely and started for the door in advance of the sheriff. He opened it, then leaped through and slammed the door back in Godfrey's face. For a drink-sodden man, he moved with astonishing alacrity. I could hear his feet pounding in the hall as Godfrey fought to get a revolver out of a hip-holster. He finally did get it out but by the time he was in the hall and able to use it, Snyder had leaped after him. He smacked down Godfrey's gun hand before he could get off a shot.

"What the hell?" the chief yelled.

"He's not our man, you fool! He's—"

He never finished his sentence because Jim Gooding had apparently gone mad. He was yelling and cursing and at the same time shooting in the general direction of the doorway with a small automatic pistol. Godfrey flattened himself on the floor. Snyder ducked back of the wall.

The only heavy object on my desk was the General Code. I picked it up and heaved it at Gooding with both hands. It caught him on his left shoulder just as he had started for the door. He swore, spun around and raised his automatic. I stood there like a clay-pigeon. Then Nate Coon, fifty-five years old, swung the hardest haymaker I've ever seen. Gooding dropped like a log.

FLOYD Mayhew, head of the Mayhew detective agency, arrived on the morning train, and we had breakfast at the Stork. Snyder recounted all the details of the case, though he told it differently than I have because he saw it differently all the time.

"From the beginning," said Snyder,

"I wondered why there was so much to-do over a three thousand dollar note and mortgage. Plainly, the receiver for the Burke brothers' company, couldn't win their case unless they came up with something really startling. I thought there had to be something more in the recovery of that note and mortgage than a mere three thousand dollars.

"When Nate Coon admitted that he had offered five hundred dollars to Parisi for the evidence he needed, that cinched it. I was afraid to ask Coon where the five hundred was coming from. I was pretty sure Gooding was putting it up, though he'd probably say it had been contributed by the creditors. That pointed the finger at Gooding. He had some special reason for having to have that note and mortgage back in his possession.

"At first I couldn't figure out why. The Bartlett property is a nice enough property, but in these times nobody could steal it with a foreclosure suit. So I decided that if the note and mortgage were worth so much to somebody it couldn't be because they had any special value. I decided the very opposite must be true. The note and mortgage were important because they were *worthless*.

"That meant that the Bartlett debt had been paid in full and that somebody had substituted a forged note and mortgage. The authentic note and mortgage had been returned to the Bartletts. They were far away, and Bartlett was in the army, so they'd neglected to record the cancellation.

"Of course the cancellation was a forgery, too, for the Burke brothers never knew the money had been paid. When they got in a jam and needed three thousand dollars they fished the papers out of the safe and turned them over to Mary Carter. That was on a Saturday afternoon, and Gooding

wasn't there. Later, when he found that they were gone, he must have had a bad moment. But he was able to cover up by mailing in money orders for the interest, a little matter he could arrange for by contacting some mercantile agency in whatever town the Bartletts happened to be in.

"In the meanwhile, Gooding was coming up in the world. He'd got a position as secretary of the town's biggest building and loan. The slightest shadow on his past would ruin him. So he was in a fix. If he paid off the note and mortgage in full, as he now could, Mary Carter would return it to the Bartletts. They would then know something was wrong, and exposure would be inevitable. The only way out for Gooding was to get possession of the papers.

"**B**UYING them through some third party would have been a simple out if the law of the state hadn't required notice of all mortgage assignments. As bookkeeper for the Burkes, Gooding had been able to fake a notice when they had assigned the mortgage to Mary Carter, but this time he couldn't prevent the Bartlett's from getting a tell-tale notice. So his hands were tied.

"Then the Burke receivership gave him a chance. He must have pulled a lot of wires getting himself appointed receiver, but then he was by now a successful business man and eligible for the job. His first move was to have his lawyer file suit for the recovery of the documents. His next one was to find some means of blackmailing the Burkes, one or the other or both, into forcing their indulgent cousin to give up.

"Gooding had to act quickly, for he was traveling on very thin ice. The Bartletts hadn't lived long in Millers-town and hadn't been here for years,

but there was a chance they'd kept up a correspondence with a few friends. The friends would be tactful enough never to mention the mortgage in their letters, but there was always a chance they might make a slip. So Gooding had to move fast.

"He nearly succeeded. He would have if Rocky Agnew hadn't found out what was going on. He was clever with drunks, and Harry would have been a fish in a barrel to him. Sam Carter must have overheard the conversation. Probably he didn't make much out of it until after Rocky was stabbed. Then he knew.

"Harry's trouble was he couldn't stop talking. He talked to Gooding when he sobered a little and realized he'd been pumped. So Gooding knew the show was over unless he got rid of both Agnew and Sam Carter. This latter is guess-work, but I think Harry will confirm it when he turns up again. He's probably still running. I don't blame

him. He knew Gooding had a gun on his back when I was questioning him. I knew it, too. That's why I told the chief to take him out."

Floyd Mayhew had been busily slicing a fried egg. He sampled a piece and expressed approval. He looked at me and smiled.

"Very good, don't you think, Mr. Grant?"

I nodded. "Perfect, I'd say."

Floyd Mahew nodded back. "I don't know why they can't fix eggs like this in River City."

He went back there after making a brief speech at the Rotary luncheon. Snyder left later with Agnew's body. I had Sam's funeral on my hands. I hated to bring up the subject to Mary, but I had to sooner or later.

"Are you going to forgive me?" I asked her.

"I'll think it over."

I shrugged. "Well, if you don't Johnny May."

ARE OUR PRISON METHODS OUTMODED?

DR. CLARENCE NEYMANN, associate professor of psychiatry at Northwestern University's medical school, made the statement that crime can never be cured with present outmoded methods of punishment and revenge.

Speaking at the Midwest Public Forum at the Hotel Continental, Chicago, where he shared the platform with Dr. Harry Hoffman, director of the Illinois Neuro-Psychiatric Institute, Dr. Neymann said "No one does penance in a penitentiary, few reform in reformatories and even less are corrected in houses of correction."

The only way to meet the crime problem is to "put the criminal out of the way." For the habitual criminal, Dr. Neymann recommended isolation from civilization.

"He should become a ward of the federal government and transported to an island far away where he can no longer be a nuisance to humanity," he said.

Pointing out that all criminals suffer from some basic disorder, Dr. Neymann concluded:

"For that reason a criminal must not be looked upon as one who must be punished . . . rather one who must be taken care of so that he cannot harm the rest of humanity."

—Pete Boggs

CHICAGO'S CRIME COMMISSION

IN 1917 the Winslow Brothers payroll was stolen in the middle of a busy day and the Chicago Association of Commerce decided that something must be done to prevent these crimes of violence—and quickly. A committee was appointed to investigate the situation and their exhaustive report was presented a year later with the recommendation that the Chicago Association of Commerce establish an active organization "for the suppression and prevention of crime."

Acting upon this suggestion, the Chicago Crime Commission was established with its 123 members serving without pay. The commission was not set up to apprehend criminals or prosecute those apprehended by law enforcement officials. Rather it was set up to "promote the efficiency and activity of all officers and departments of the State, County, and City administrations charged with the duty of suppression, prevention, and punishment of crime." Certainly, you will admit, a laudable purpose.

The reduced crime rate in Chicago is ample testimony to the effectiveness of the Commission and is a tribute to these business men who have given their time freely so that their city would be a safer one in which to live. And, daily, that reward is improving.

—June Lurie

Run, Rabbit, Run

by Frances M. Deegan



**When you start mixing
with the bluebloods,
don't be surprised if
some of it begins to
flow. Then it isn't blue
—just plain red!**

I KNOW how it feels to be hunted. I know what it's like to play Hounds and Hare. To be hopping on the up-beat while all the rest of the world is hitting the down-beat and swinging right along.

I knew it was a mistake from the beginning. I knew I couldn't sit in with the gold-plated crew Alma had joined in holy matrimony.

Her husband, Hamilton Granby III., played with prime ministers and displaced royalty. His brother, Forman

Granby, played with antique art and brand new blondes. His nephew, Rex Granby, played polo and other expensive horse games. And his sister Ruth played hell with the social register, dictating who was in—and out!

I told Alma. I said. "Look, Hon. Just because I'm a five-alarm riot on Broadway. Just because I packed 'em in at the Paramount for three weeks straight. Just because I'm solid with the cats. That don't mean I can step out in society and make like the Astor-



Ruth kicked and bucked like a horse, but I kept the pillow over her face

bilts. When it comes to the snoot-nose circle," I said, "I haven't got what it takes. And I'll never miss it."

She just looked at me.

"Goodbye," I said. "You take the high road and I'll take the low road and we'll probably never see each other again. But thanks for the invitation, Honey."

Alma was a honey. Her hair was a pale flame, and her yellow-green eyes had a language all their own. They'd melt, and she'd say, "Darling . . ." And something sweet and warm dripped into your veins. It made no difference what else she said. You knew you were going to do it, no matter what.

"Darling," she said to me, "Alma needs you. I've been worried for weeks. There's something . . . I don't know . . . all wrong. You've got to come and see for yourself. And tell me what to do. You've never failed me before, Sammy. You're so sweet, and . . . Darling, there isn't anyone else."

Wonderful sense of timing she had. She talked words like she sang lyrics. Weaving an exciting rhythm with those red lips of hers.

I thought about it while I huddled in a fox hole. It smelled like it. It was raining. A cold, dismal pitter-patter that went all the way through to your bones. As if I wasn't cold enough, with an armed posse on my tail. I thought how warm Alma's voice was. I thought what a shame it was that Alma had married Hamilton Granby and quit the band. Just when I was heading for the top.

SAMMY SHOPA. THE HORN.
IN PERSON. WITH ALMA LA-
VERNE.

I'D DREAMED about it. With her right up there beside me. If only she'd stuck with me!

Instead she married Hamilton Gran-

by. A stuffed shirt. But the stuffing was the kind they keep locked up in banks. Sure, Granby had plenty of stuff, and Alma was hungry. She'd been hungry as long as I'd known her. Ever since the night I'd picked her up in a dive where she was singing for peanuts. She sang, and it bothered you.

Al Stein, my piano, was with me and he got it, too. He said, "Strictly from hunger."

So we fed her. Steak and potatoes, and chocolate pie a-la-mode. We fed her and we took her away from there . . .

Somewhere down below the hill a light flashed in the rain and went dancing and jumping in among the trees. Tracking me down. The animal shivers started up again, and I crouched there straining my eyes in the blackness. I was dead beat. But I couldn't stay there. I couldn't let them catch me. They were after blood—my blood. Run, rabbit, run!

I scrambled out of the muddy hole and started climbing in the dark. Blind as a bat, and fighting panic. I slipped and caught hold of a rock. It was rough. It cut my hands. I hung on and got my feet under me and leaned on the rock, panting.

I was dizzy. It felt like the rock was moving behind me. The rock lurched and I threw myself forward and couldn't stop rolling. The rock tipped over with a soggy smash, and went on down the hill, deliberate and ponderous with its evil intent. A Judas rock. Thousands of other rocks on this hill, and I had to pick that one.

Crazy laughter was bubbling in my throat. I choked it down. It felt like I was swallowing big chunks of the rock. Far below I could hear splintering crashes as the rock hit the scrub pine.

I was caught in a cleft. I thought my ribs were caved in. I thought,

"What's the use?"

I dragged myself out. I went on climbing and wheezing. Because I remembered their faces. I remembered their voices. All of them accusing me—of murder. Me. A rabbit!

Scat little rabbit, run like hell, there they are down there panting for the kill—the hound pack.

This time they wouldn't miss. This time they'd all shoot. Not just the one, whoever it was, who had tried it before. It was perfectly sporting. Perfectly legitimate. They had the Sheriff with them. They had everything else with them, too. Guns and lights, and the rain softening the ground for my prints. And rocks that jumped out of the hill to betray me.

There was a Ranger station on top of the hill. If I could make that; if I could make the guy on duty understand that I hadn't come to the Granby estate with murder in mind. That I didn't really deserve to be shot down like a mad killer. That I was only a rabbit—

I went to my knees and grabbed a wet bush with small, sharp branches. I pulled myself up and there I was on a flat, cleared space. And there was the Ranger station, boosted up on stilts, dripping dismally, and dark as a dead hope. I climbed the ladder and shook the door. It was padlocked. I balanced on one foot and tried to kick the door in. Both feet missed and I went down the ladder upside down, clutching and clawing until my head hit the ground.

I stayed there. I wasn't out. Just frustrated, and sick with it. Maybe that was what I needed. Maybe the bang on the head did me some good, because the sick frustration started churning up and fomented into rage. I lay there and breathed jagged curses. Then I rolled over and sat up, ready to face the cold facts.

"All right, Shopa," I said. "If you have to be a rabbit, at least you can act like a smart bunny. You can double back on your tracks. You can fool these goddam dogs if you've got half a gut left."

I thought about climbing up and using a rock on that padlock. I might find a gun, a flashlight. There was a telephone in there. And then I heard them—the human hounds. They must have found an easier way up than I had used. They were all around me, spreading out and nosing up to the narrow plateau. What did they have to be scared of? They had guns.

MY FEET were wet anyway, so I jerked off my shoes and slung them around my neck. I stumbled around and found the trail leading down from the station on the opposite side of the hill. I ran. I wasn't so blind now. My eyes were used to the dark, and my mind was ticking over like a motor suddenly come to life. I heard shouts and yells behind me. And then I heard the son-of-a-gun in front of me. He was bellowing like a moose.

I dived off the trail and hit a tree. Don't ask me what kind of a tree. I shinnied up the trunk and hung there in a crotch. Trying not to shake the branches. Trying to breathe through the top of my head. A light started flashing around a bend in the trail, and the moose bellowed again. He was good. He had a throat like a brass amplifier, whispering to his friends in China.

It was not part of his plan to get plugged by mistake. He came on with all the light and sound effects of the world's champion fire department. He was the missing Ranger. So now I knew. I felt like giggling. I felt like sneering at him. I felt like yelling, "You're not so smart, you goddam

dogs!"

I knew they'd notified the Ranger to be on the lookout for me. I knew he'd sneaked down the back trail and found no sign of me. And now the trail was clear, while they were milling around up at the station. Skip, little bunny. Scram-scam!

I slid out of the tree and eased around the bend in the trail. The trees and bushes were dripping, but the rain was letting up a little, blowing in thin gusts from unexpected places, like a mad spook spitting in your face. I remembered my track training in high school and fell into a clumsy lope. My feet were too numb with cold to feel the rough spots, and I was too keyed up to notice the other aches and pains. Pretty soon I warmed up and got a little rhythm into the lope.

There was a rhythm in my brain, too. Alma's honey voice, saying, "I miss you, Sammy . . . Darling, you've no idea how I miss you." Saying it soft and slow, breathing that undercurrent of sweet hunger. It had been running through my head ever since she said it.

That was Friday. I hadn't been in the house more than thirty minutes when she said it. We were all in the big central hall. Very English, the Granby country house was. The hall had a tile floor and faded tapestries hanging here and there. There was an ugly fireplace on one side that would have made a dandy home for two elephants; and a staircase on the other, wide enough to accommodate both elephants at once if they happened to be in a hurry.

We were having cocktails and conversation. Very cozy, like in Madison Square Garden. I didn't like it. I don't go for double cocktails, and the conversation was just double talk. They had all been out playing with guns. Skeet shooting, they called it. The only

skeet I ever knew was Skeet Monahan, a whiz on the drums.

I gave Alma a look that told her what I thought of these elaborate nit-wits. She was wearing muddy slacks and a white shirt open at the throat. She came over and stood there with a queer expression in her eyes. They looked hurt and half-amused at the same time. Rueful, I guess you'd call it, and her mouth was the same.

She said, "Sammy . . . Don't hate me for bringing you here. I wanted you to see . . ."

I tried to get tough. I sneered at her. "So this is how you're wasting your talents? Shooting skeets!"

Then she said it: "I miss you, Sammy . . . Darling, you've no idea . . ."

"So you made a mistake," I growled. "So what are you going to do about it?"

"I don't know. Sammy, I don't know . . ." That's what she said, but her voice slid upward at the end with a helpless question. Her eyes were asking it, too, round and pleading like a little lost kid, asking the way home.

That was all, brother. I didn't need any more. Alma was in a spot, and I had to get her out of it. Again. Just like I'd been doing ever since I got her out of the dive where I first saw her.

I LOOKED over toward the fireplace where Hamilton Granby III had one foot up on the fender. He leaned over resting his elbow on his knee with a glass tilted in his hand. His other paw was waving around, illustrating some law he had just propounded for the betterment of skeet shooters. They were all strewn around the fireplace where half a tree was burning angrily, hissing and spurting sparks. Quite a portrait. The Famous Granby Family at Home.

Hamilton Granby was a young 45,

with an arrogant chin, a thin nose, and a big, rangy body that had been kept in good condition. His eyes were a blank, gray-blue with no more expression than a pair of well-matched marbles. His voice was light and pleasant.

"Timing," he announced with authority, "is the most important factor when you're shooting at a moving target. If you perfect your timing, you can forget all the rules—"

"What a convenient theory," said Rex Granby insolently. He was sprawled in a deep leather chair. Slim as a whip and handsome in a dashing South American way, his black hair and eyes advertised his mother's Spanish blood. "There are so many times when it's advantageous to forget the rules."

Ruth Granby Colfax reared up in her seat like a touchy mare. She was a female copy of her brother Hamilton. They might have been twins for all I know. But where the long jaw and large boned frame gave Hamilton a certain he-man attraction, on her it didn't look so good. It looked horsey. She sounded that way, too. Her voice was a nasal whinny.

"You don't get the point, Rex," she whinnied. "You never do. That tricky Latin temperament of yours can be very annoying. What Ham meant—" . .

Brother Forman spoke up from the depths of the davenport where his long, thin anatomy was cradled. But he made no attempt to defend his son's temperament. "There is nothing original about Ham's alleged idea," he remarked languidly. "So why argue about it? In any sport or art or profession it is a fundamental process to learn all the rules so thoroughly that they become automatic, and you can thus, in effect, forget them and concentrate your faculties on a higher skill. Any novice knows that, but Ham's blurred carbon copy mentality never presents a very clear

picture. Why not ask an expert? Ask our talented guest if Ham's stolen theory isn't a basic concept in his own profession."

He meant me, but I didn't want any part of it. I said, "I wouldn't know, Mr. Granby. I never bothered to analyze the music game. I just work at it."

"Hah!" barked Rex Granby. "Another Latin temperament!"

"How very unfortunate," murmured Forman sadly. "Especially if it leads to further complications."

I WANTED to take him up on that, but I didn't know what he meant. Alma left me suddenly, and sat down on the other side of the fireplace. I decided to keep my mouth shut until I found out what it was all about.

Hamilton had held his pose through all this. Now he brought his foot down off the fender with a thud and stalked to the long, antique table in the middle of the hall where he filled his glass. Then he spoke, leaning back against the table.

"As I was saying" he informed us pleasantly, "Timing is essential. Most amateurs seem to think that if they hit a certain number of targets on the range, they are expert marksmen. But present them with a live target and they are very quickly disillusioned. My point is simply—"

"It might be fatal to hit a live target," said Rex softly, but his eyes were slits of venom, and there was a brief, awkward pause as if everybody held their breath.

Sister Ruth snorted, and said, "What an asinine remark! If you're after a bird, naturally you shoot to kill. What Ham meant—"

And they started all over again. There was something here I didn't like. I didn't get it. All I knew was that

Alma wanted out. And Alma wasn't the type to leave a platinum lined nest on a mere girlish impulse. There had to be a damned ugly reason. Maybe I was looking for it. Maybe if I hadn't known right away how Alma felt, I wouldn't have noticed anything wrong. But it sounded to me as if they were all taking nasty cracks at each other, and even trying to drag me into it. . . .

A shot smacked the wet night somewhere far behind me and echoed briefly with a sodden finality. Somebody in that hound pack had a nervous finger. Somebody was over-anxious, shooting at shadows.

I didn't stop. I knew where I was going now. I'd been over part of this trail before, on and off horseback. That was Saturday morning. Never a dull moment! After a week end with the galloping Granby's a form-fitting strait-jacket would feel good.

I've met a lot of nice horses and we got along fine. A civilized canter through the park on a bright spring morning is just my dish. But this business of climbing aboard a wild charger and dashing across country, leaping ditches and hedges, and attacking mountains—that I can do without. And I did. I bounced once too often and too high, and when I came down the horse was still going without me. I let him go with a fond curse. I got up and limped back to the manor house. Don't ask me how many miles. I lost track. I was staggering, but I made it to the arena—the central hall, that is, and rang for a drink.

One of the lackeys came and bowed solemnly without asking any questions. He didn't ask me if my neck was broken, or did I need a physician and surgeon.

I collapsed on the davenport and waited for my drink. He came back with the whole works. Scotch, rye, gin,

vermouth and soda, garnished with chipped ice, sugar, bitters, lemons, and a lot of other trimmings I didn't need. He set the tray down on the table, turned his back and marched away, as much as to say: "There you are, stupid. Go ahead and drink your fool head off!"

"Love you," I said drearily, "you great big blank blank blank."

Pretty soon the Granby horde came stomping in. Nobody was surprised to find my body back in the manor house. Apparently they all took it for granted that I'd fallen off the nag somewhere along the way. How I got back was my own business. But the horse, that was a man of another color.

"You should have looked after your horse, you know," said Forman, arranging the cushions at one end of the davenport. "Would you mind dropping into that chair over there, I'd like to lie down."

"You and me both!" I muttered, but I took to the chair rather than have his big feet in my lap.

I was waiting for Alma to come over and ask me how bad I felt. With a little encouragement I thought I might be persuaded to take to my bed. Not only because I felt terrible, but it was the only way I could think of to get a private word with Alma. I'd tried everything else, but no dice. The gruesome Granbys did everything in a body. I'm surprised they didn't all sleep together, so they could keep up their wrangling after they all went to bed.

ALMA wasn't even looking at me. She was standing with the others at the table, where the lackey was mixing and serving drinks. She had her back to me, but I knew something was wrong. Her back was too stiff, defensive. Nobody was saying anything in front of the lackey. Nobody but Forman. He was still going on about the

horse.

"After all, once you mount a horse, he's your responsibility," he murmured reproachfully. "As it was I had to break my run and pick him up. Your responsibility entirely."

"That's funny," I croaked with controlled frenzy. "I thought it was the other way around. I expected the horse to come back and pick me up. I was never so disappointed in my life!"

"It's no laughing matter," he said seriously. "Horse is valuable."

"You got me wrong, Mr. Granby. I'm not laughing at a horse. I'm crying over a jackass!"

"Who's a jackass?" said Alma brightly. Her eyes were too big, glassy.

"Take your pick!" I snapped and hobbled over to the table for another drink. The lackey had removed himself.

Hamilton took up his favorite pose at the fireplace as the others seated themselves.

"Here we go again," I muttered, and poured myself a stiff one. "Clear the arena. The Granby family feud is about to be resumed."

"I shall never be able to understand," commence Hamilton gravely, "why any one should agree upon a clear course, start out with every indication of finishing it, and then suddenly change their mind in the very middle of the run and go off at a tangent."

I came back and flopped and he fixed me with those empty eyes, continuing his lecture.

"What can the object be?" he inquired earnestly. "The whole idea of a competitive run is to determine who comes in first. We put down our wagers in good faith, and what happens?"

"If you're talking to me," I said flatly, "the tangent I took was entirely involuntary. I was the victim of a

homicidal horse, and I'm thinking of suing for damages!"

"I certainly think you should!" declared Rex emphatically. "Fillmore is an unmanageable beast, and every one at the stables knows it. An inexperienced rider should never have been mounted—"

"For Heaven's sake!" squealed Ruth. "Why must you always resort to lurid melodrama? Fillmore is a perfectly trained animal, and you know it. Even a good rider sometimes takes a fall. What Ham meant—"

"Ham does get tiresome with his interminable circumlocution," said Forman without missing a beat. "But your attempts to interpret him, my dear Ruth, border on insult. We are perfectly capable of divining Ham's meaning, since we have a reasonable number of eyes and ears, and were able to observe as much, if not more than he did."

"Therefore I ask you what happens," continued Ham evenly, as if there had been no intercourse whatever since his last words, "when two riders set the pace, take an unfair advantage of the terrain to keep the lead, and then deliberately disappear?"

"I told you it was convenient to forget the rules," said Rex slyly.

"Are you talking about me, or two other guys?" I inquired. "I'd like to be informed so I know who's insulting who."

"He's talking about me, Laddie-boy," said Rex. He stood up and gave me a hard, tight grin, his black eyes flashing danger signals. "About me and about his charming—"

"Rex!" Alma was on her feet, looking wide-eyed and scared.

"His charming wife!" continued Rex savagely. "He wants to know why we made a fool of him by ducking off the trail and leaving him to race himself madly to the top of Watch Hill. He

wants to know what we were doing all the time he was looking for us. Would you like to know too? Should I tell you?"

"Rex, you promised—" Alma started toward him. Forman's long arm swung out and clutched her knee, holding her fast.

"I'll tell you," said Rex softly to me. "We were having a quiet ride home. The long way 'round. And we were talking about my mother." His arm whipped down viciously and his glass shattered in the fireplace. "About how my mother was *murdered!*"

THE next minute he was across the hall and bounding up the stairs.

"Rex! You're mad!" shrilled Ruth, stumbling after him. "Wait!"

"Let him go," said Forman wearily. "Sit down, Alma."

Hamilton lifted his foot off the fender and shook his head ponderously. "It's in the blood apparently," he said, and looked at me for no reason at all. "Delusions, you know. His mother too." He proceeded to the table for a fresh drink.

Ruth moved slowly away from the stairs and joined him. They stood there muttering over their drinks.

"Now," I thought, "Maybe we're getting somewhere."

I remembered how Alma and Rex had dashed off ahead of everybody else. Alma could ride. I think she had cowboy blood in her. And that Rex! Whatever else I had against him, I had to admit he was a superb horseman. He was mounted on a big bay gelding, a fireball if I ever saw one, and Rex rode him like a mad Arab. He should have been in a circus. I thought at the time they were just showing off. Now I knew they had it all planned.

It didn't set so good. I hadn't been able to get Alma alone, but she had

managed it with Rex. Still, Rex couldn't have been lying about what they did. He couldn't have been kidding about his mother being murdered! He could be wrong, but he couldn't be kidding.

Forman said gently, "You must not let Rex upset you, Alma. You must know that he is emotionally unbalanced. His mother has been dead for twenty years. It is only since he came back to us that he has been having these fits of despondency. But you must not let his violence frighten you."

Alma just sat there, weaving her fingers together and unweaving them methodically. Not like herself at all. She was too subdued. She *was* frightened. I didn't blame her.

"How long has he been out?" I asked bluntly.

Forman opened his eyes and said, "I beg your pardon?"

"How long," I said, "since he came back from the institution or whatever it was, where you sent him?"

"What *are* you talking about?" screeched Ruth, rearing and stamping toward me. "You beastly wretch! What have you been—"

"Shut up!" said Forman with sudden force. "He doesn't know what he's talking about."

"I think I do," I said. I was tired of being polite to these zanies. "I seem to remember reading something about it seven or eight years ago."

"I suspect that you confine your reading to the more sensational newspapers," said Hamilton sternly. He was standing in front of Ruth, holding those blank eyes on me. "I shall never cease to be surprised at the gullibility of the great unintellectual public. Their thought processes are keyed to a world of fantasy. Nothing they read has any basis in fact, and yet—"

Forman lifted his limp frame to a

sitting posture in a wild excess of energy. "I hardly think a lecture is needed here," he said acidly. "Mr. Shopa is laboring under a misapprehension. I merely mentioned that Rex has been extremely emotional since his return. As a matter of fact, he said to me, 'It was only five years ago that Rex went to South America to visit his mother's family. The family home may, or may not be a type of institution, depending upon the point of view. Some of those old Spanish dons still maintain mediaeval households. I suggest we get dressed. The Johnsons and the Fremonts are coming to dinner, unless I, too, am having delusions.'"

And that was that. We didn't have enough complications, we had to have guests for dinner yet. I wasn't a guest any more myself. I was right in there slugging with the rest of the family.

I tried to get a word with Alma, but all I got was a whisper in the upstairs hall. She said, "Sammy, do be careful! Ham is so jealous. I'll tell you all about it . . . soon."

A LOT of good that did me! But I knew one thing. I wasn't mistaken about that institution. And it was nearly eight years ago. There was a nasty scandal about a wild party in a Broadway hotel. A bellboy went out the window. Maybe he fell, and maybe he was tossed out. It was never decided, because it was all hushed up. I could vaguely remember the headlines. "Don Denies Knowledge of Fatal Fall." And later, "Granby Heir Held in Seclusion." That's how it was covered up, by slipping him into a private asylum. There was something else, if I could remember what it was . . .

An owl hooted mournfully in the wet night, and I missed a step and stumbled. I felt like an old man. I felt like I'd been running through this dripping

nightmare for a lifetime. And I couldn't stop. The hounds were back there somewhere. They wouldn't stop. But as long as I kept running I was still alive. I didn't have to hold myself down to a jog-trot any more. It was all I could do to keep going. My feet scuffed gravel, and I knew I'd hit the private road that led to the stables and the back of the Granby house. It wasn't so far now. Maybe the nightmare would end after all. But that's not saying how.

Alma's bedroom was at the back of the house. I'd been there before. I knew it inside and out. I went in by the door, but I came out through the window.

I finally got tired of waiting for an explanation. I thought any minute I'd be invited to leave. The atmosphere was crackling with storm signals all through dinner with the Johnsons and the Fremonts, four active nit-wits of the same caliber as the Granbys. I decided I didn't want to be a millionaire after all. Once you got the million, there was nothing left to do but play silly games. That's all they talked about. They gave me a pain in the ears. They kept me from talking to Alma.

After everybody went upstairs, I thought: "The hell with polite manners. Alma is scared. That's why she won't talk to me. Why else would she ask me out here and then avoid me like I had fleas? She wants to be rescued from this plush-lined madhouse, and I'm just the guy that can do it, husband or no husband."

I went down the hall to her room and tapped our old signal from "Strike Up the Band." Da-da-da dum-dum.

She opened the door like she was expecting me. She had a hairbrush in her hand and a green velvet robe wrapped around her. She said, "Oh, Sammy . . . Darling."

I kissed her. "You poor, scared kid," I muttered. "You poor little—"

"Sammy, I've got to get out of here." She was breathless, the robe was quivering and palpitating with excitement.

"I know, Honey. I'll get you out. You've got to tell me some things first. That Rex—he's crazy. You've got to stay away from him."

"Oh, no!" she gasped. "Not Rex. He's the one who told me—"

"I don't care what he told you. He's nuts!" I repeated the headline I remembered and explained what I knew about it. I said, "I don't suppose he told you about that, did he?"

"Well, no." She looked puzzled. "But I don't see why the papers called him the Granby heir. Because he isn't. He isn't even related to the Granbys. He was four years old when his mother married Forman. He has Indian blood in him and the Granbys weren't taking any chances that he might inherit the estate. On his twenty-first birthday they made a cash settlement on him and he signed a release of all further rights."

"That's what he told you," I said. "What's all this about his mother?"

"She was killed in a hunting accident when he was five years old. That's all he knew about it until he went to South America to visit his relatives. There was an old Indian woman there. She had been his mother's servant. They sent her back home after his mother was killed. And she told Rex it was no accident, that somebody deliberately shot his mother." Her eyes filled with tears.

"Real old-time melodrama," I snarled. "And why would he be telling you all this?"

"Because he's afraid something might happen to me, too. He was afraid there might be an accident today, where the Watch Hill trail crosses

that narrow ledge. He said it would be too easy to crowd a horse over the edge. That's why he pulled me off the trail and told me about his mother."

"Oh, for God's sake! And you swallowed all this?"

"Why else would they give you a bad horse to ride? Fillmore belongs to Ruth. I thought she was riding him. She's the only one who can manage him."

"Is that on the level?" I asked. "Why didn't somebody tell me?"

"I didn't know about it until we came back. I don't understand why Hamilton let you ride him. That horse is a devil. Don't you see? It was done to keep you out of the race while the—the accident happened."

"But why?" I snapped. "Why would anybody want you to have an accident? What have they got against—"

The door banged open and Hamilton stomped into the room. "What the devil are you doing in here?" he roared.

I said, "Now just a minute—"

HHE SMASHED me in the mouth. I went down worrying about my lip and my trumpet. I remember that. Then my head must have hit a chair or something. I must have blacked out for a second. The next thing I knew there was a loud bang.

I was groggy. Say I didn't know what I was doing. I went out through the French window and over the balcony rail. I was chasing the bang. I was out in the wet night running around in circles. I heard yells and commotion.

Somebody howled: "Get him! He went that way!"

I fell into a bush. I wondered what was the matter with me. I wondered what I was doing out here in the rain.

People were running from the stables and garage. Lights were going on. I

began to come out of it. I knew where I was. I got up and started back toward the house.

I heard a loud bellow: "Spread out and look for him. It's Shopa. He's out there somewhere. Don't let him get away!"

Somebody took a shot at me. I just stood there in the half dark. Another shot ripped a tree trunk about a foot from my ear. Then I got it! They thought I was the killer! They were shooting at me!

"There he is!" Ruth was shrieking from the balcony.

What I did next was pure luck. I took a step backward, stumbled over a thick tree root, and rolled down into an icy little brook. That shocked me awake. I crawled through some bushes and crouched there. It didn't take me long to make up my mind. I started running . . .

I was still running when I came back to the same spot. The place looked deserted. I stopped running. There was no sound except the steady dripping of the trees. I waited until my breathing slowed down to shallow gasps. Then I walked across the lawn and climbed up to the balcony.

There was one dim light burning in Alma's room. I pushed the French window open and looked at her. She was lying on the bed under a green satin puff. Her hair flamed softly in the lamp light. She still had her makeup on, and her red lips were half parted in a full pout. I stepped inside and she opened her eyes.

I walked to the bed and stood there looking down at her. I could see the muscles in her throat working. She said, "Sammy?" Her voice was choked.

"Yes."

"Sammy . . . You killed him."

"No."

"You shot him."

"No. Somebody was shooting at you. How did he happen to get it?"

"I—I don't know. I couldn't see. All at once he was in front of me. After he—he knocked you down, he yelled and jumped in front of me."

"That was it," I said. "He saw the killer on the balcony. He knew. That's why he went tearing up the trail on Watch Hill today. He knew somebody was trying to get you. That's why he didn't pay any attention to what horse I rode. He must have been half crazy trying to catch up with you. The poor devil must have loved you, Alma. He didn't hesitate to take the bullet intended for you."

Her eyes were dark and intense. She was still trying to understand. "You ran," she said. "You ran away."

"I had to. The killer was shooting at me. Trying to make it look as if I had shot Hamilton. With me dead, the case is closed. They're still after me, but I had to come back. I was afraid I wouldn't make it. I was afraid I'd be too late. The killer still wants you dead too."

The French windows swung open and Ruth stood there, with a gun in her hand. She looked wild, with her short gray hair on end, and her boots and breeches splattered with mud.

"Come in," I said. "We were expecting you. But before you shoot, you'd better hear what I have to say. That's if you want to save your son from a murder indictment."

SHE stepped into the room and walked toward me with an insane glitter in those pale Granby eyes. She stopped about six feet away and stood there, not saying anything, waiting for me to talk.

"I know all about it," I said. "That's why I came back here. I knew you'd start the hounds—after me, and then

sneak back here to kill Alma. You Granbys are jealous people. With you, it's your son, Donald. You want him to inherit the Granby estate. You don't want either one of your brothers to have any heirs. That's why you killed Rex's mother, and tried to kill Alma. But you're not going to do it. And I'll tell you why."

Alma moved on her pillows and Ruth's eyes shifted quickly to the bed and back to me. Her long jaw tightened, but she didn't open her mouth.

"What if I told you," I said, "that I've got a witness to what happened in that hotel room eight years ago? A witness who saw your son throw the bellhop out the window? What if I tell you he's never talked because he was afraid of being charged as an accessory, but he's ready to talk now because he needs money. Maybe the bellhop's family would pay him to talk, but they couldn't pay as much as you could. You could pay him enough to keep his mouth shut and disappear."

Her thin lips opened. Her voice was raw. "How much?"

I wanted to sit down on the bed. My legs were wet strings.

"Understand me," I said carefully. "If anything happens to me, he'll know. And he'll talk. He—"

"How much do you want?" she rasped.

"Fifty thousand."

"No."

"Well, I'm just acting as an agent. If I knew what you thought it was worth—"

"Twenty-five thousand."

"It's not enough."

"Twenty-five thousand."

We went on haggling like that. I don't remember all of it. We just kept repeating ourselves, trying to wear each other down. I didn't think I could keep it up much longer. And then I

heard them again—the hounds, coming back. She heard it, too, and her gun hand twitched. Her eyes slid toward the balcony. I yanked a pillow off the bed and rushed her with it. We both went down and the gun exploded in my face. She was thrashing around like a savage horse.

I pushed the pillow over her face and planted one elbow to hold it there, while she went on kicking. Suddenly Alma was there in her nightie, struggling for the gun.

"Step on it!" I gasped. "Step on her arm, she'll shoot—"

Alma was wearing high-heeled mules. She stamped on the flailing arm like it was a snake, and then she had the gun. All the pressure went out of my arm, and my face almost hit the pillow. I knew now why I wasn't using the other arm. It was limp and the pain started shooting down to my wrist and up through my shoulder. The bullet went in just above the elbow. . . .

ALMA sat on the side of my bed and held my good hand. The Sheriff had gone, and taken his gun-toting hounds with him. He was upset about the whole thing. He'd had to take the awful responsibility of arresting a Granby. Forman tried to put up a little resistance. He tried to make out Alma and I were lying, but Rex sided with us, and Forman finally had to give up. He said, "I think I'll lie down." And he went away with a look of despair on his face.

Alma said, "Darling . . ."

"H'm?"

"How did you know about Donald Granby. And who is the witness?"

"There isn't any witness. I just made it all up. It was a terrific bluff, and it worked. But if I had been wrong about her son being guilty, we wouldn't be here, Honey."

"You were wonderful, Sammy."

"Not so hot," I murmured, half asleep. "It took me long enough to get onto that name, Don. I thought the newspapers called him Don because he was a Spanish South American—Rex, that is. He was the only member of the second generation I could see, so I thought he was the Don and the heir the papers mentioned. Then when I was trying to get away from the posse, I slipped and fell down the ladder at the Ranger station. It reminded me of the bellhop, falling out the window, and it must have jarred my brain, because I started remembering other things, too. I remembered you told me Rex was not the Granby heir, and I thought if he wasn't the heir then why were they so fussy about the inheritance if there wasn't anybody else. I remembered that I didn't believe anything you told me about what Rex had said, but somebody had fired a gun into your room, and that made everything Rex had said look like cold facts. Cold facts—Colfax. It was crazy, but that's how I got it. I knew there was something else about that bellhop killing I should remember, and that was it. The papers called him the Granby heir, but his name wasn't Granby, it was Colfax. So then I knew. I knew who it was who didn't want any other heirs, and that was the motive for killing off

the wives of the Granby brothers."

"Sammy, you're wonderful . . . And you're so sweet. What would I ever have done without you?"

My hand slid up her arm and I pulled her toward me. She turned her head, and said, "Oh, here's Rex now."

He walked into the room, his brilliant black eyes taking in everything. He lifted Alma off the bed, and put his arm around her.

"I think we'd better let Sammy rest now," he said without smiling. "He's had a busy day. We can tell him the rest of our story tomorrow."

Alma turned out the light and I closed my eyes. I thought, "That's funny. I thought it was my story. I thought I was telling it. Pretty good, too . . . The tale of a rabbit. . . ."

* * *

I had a letter from Alma the other day. She seems happy and contented. But I've got my agent working on a South American contract. That's where Alma is. She's been married to Rex for six months now. I figure I might as well save myself a lot of trouble. Sooner or later she's going to start yelling for Sammy to come and get her out of this or that. I might as well be in the same hemisphere when it happens.

HUMOR IN THE CRIME NEWS

DAILY crime news in the U. S. is generally of a serious nature, so that an occasional flash of humor comes as a pleasant surprise. Take the case of the Plainview, Texas, traffic police who were distressed by the number of accidents in the city, a great many caused by women drivers. In order to promote safe driving they gave away—to very careful women drivers—gifts of nylon hose!

A judge in Illinois brought a few smiles to folks in his courtroom recently when he sentenced a chicken thief who had confessed to wandering into the wrong coop.

"Thirty days in jail," he told the guilty man, "OR dress 100 chickens for the policeman's chari-

ty dinner!"

Our favorite, however, comes from New York. During a line-up, the police began inspecting the belongings of a tough looking character who had been seized while breaking into a delicatessen.

When the cops began examining his brass knuckles, the thug became quite perturbed. Then bashfully he asked the police to treat the knuckles gently, for they had a special meaning to him alone.

A closer examination revealed the following inscription just inside the little finger: "With truest love, from Mildred. August 1926."

—Lee Owens

Forty Cent Tip

by Harrison B. Latimer

Two men were being tried in that stuffy courtroom: the defendant—and his lawyer!

"EVENIN', counselor."

Jim Ward stared with bloodshot eyes at the man who had greeted him.

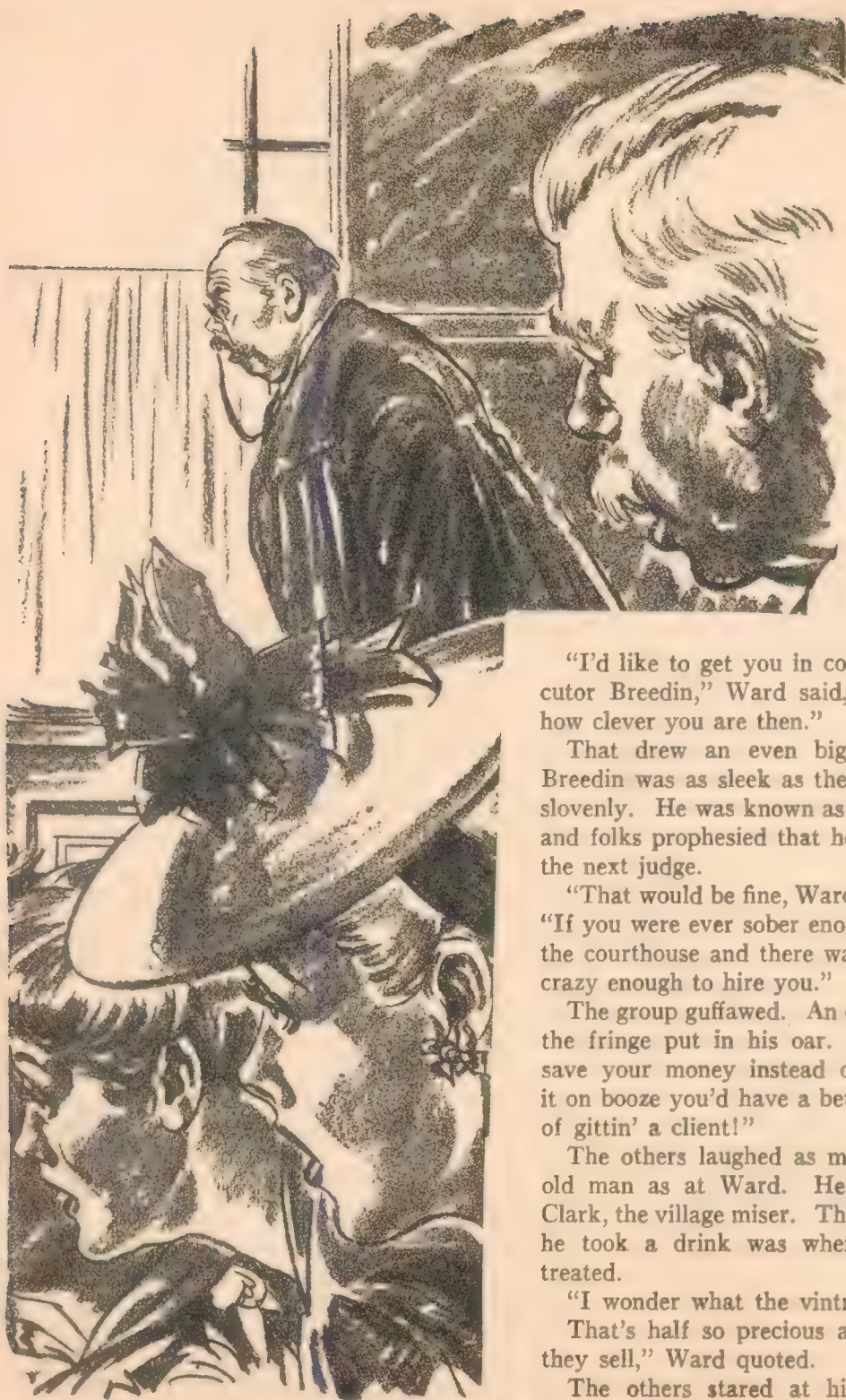
"Good evening," he replied curtly.

"Tried any big cases lately?" Grant Breedin asked.

The men gathered around Breedin laughed. Baiting Jim Ward was their favorite pastime.



He made one wild effort to break away, but a glimpse of the bailiff's gun stopped him



"I'd like to get you in court, Prosecutor Breedin," Ward said, "And see how clever you are then."

That drew an even bigger laugh. Breedin was as sleek as the other was slovenly. He was known as a "comer" and folks prophesied that he would be the next judge.

"That would be fine, Ward," he said, "If you were ever sober enough to find the courthouse and there was someone crazy enough to hire you."

The group guffawed. An old man on the fringe put in his oar. "If you'd save your money instead of spendin' it on booze you'd have a better chance of gittin' a client!"

The others laughed as much at the old man as at Ward. He was Fred Clark, the village miser. The only time he took a drink was when someone treated.

"I wonder what the vintners buy That's half so precious as the stuff they sell," Ward quoted.

The others stared at him and he

sneered. "You wouldn't know about Omar," he told them. "He's a friend of mine who liked to drink, too."

Phelps, the druggist, came out of his store, in front of which the group had collected. He grinned around at the others.

"Any friend of yours would have to drink," was his contribution to the conversation.

"You never refuse to sell me the stuff, do you?" Ward shot back.

They watched him wobble away, maintaining as much dignity as he could. It was little enough they knew about the man who had come to the town of Willow Green three years before.

Then he had looked about thirty-five, now at least ten years older. Once, in a drink-mellow mood he had told someone that he had been a successful attorney in Chicago.

"Excuse me, gentlemen."

A tall, gaunt man, wearing a goatee, waited for them to move away from the doorway they were blocking. It led up to the doctor's office above the drug store.

"Evenin', Dr. Lawrence," they chorused.

The doctor was even more of a mystery to them than was Jim Ward. He, too, was a comparative newcomer to the town of eight hundred, having moved there only a short time before Ward. After proving himself competent in several emergencies he had been accepted and had built up a good practice. That was all anyone knew about him. He had no confidants and although the snoops had found out that he had come from Texas, that was all they could discover.

"A good man," someone ventured as the doctor moved down the street toward the widow Wilson's, where he boarded.

PHELPS offered a professional opinion. "He is that," he said, "But a little old. A doctor's got to be up to date. My Frank's interning in Milwaukee, and he's always writing me about the wonderful things they can do nowadays."

Their innate dislike of all strangers, especially those who kept to themselves, made them agree. Since everybody in the town knew all about everybody else the one who remained silent had an advantage over the rest.

"Well," someone observed, "A doctor's not like a lawyer. When you're sick you've *got* to call him whether he's up to date or not.

"Only other one who's at all close is Doc Verne at Prairie Grove," someone put in, "And that's near twenty mile."

Phelps looked at his watch. "Time to close up," he announced.

The group dissolved as the lights of the store dimmed. . . .

Eight-thirty the next morning found Clara Howe entering the pharmacy. Seeing no one in front she walked to the back and stuck her head behind the prescription desk.

Her sudden appearance startled Phelps so that the bottle in his hand shook and spilled over. "I didn't hear you come in," he told her.

"I'm sorry. I just wanted to ask you to have some things ready for me when I go home this evening."

She gave him her order. "And don't forget a hypodermic syringe. The one I have at home is broken."

"All right, Clara. But how come you're down so early this morning? Don't usually start till ten."

"The doctor is going out of town for the day," she told him. "He wanted me to be here to answer any call that might come in."

The doctor had found the forty-year

old spinster an excellent nurse. She had diabetes herself and took an intense interest in all diseases, devouring medical books as other women did novels.

"I'll have it ready," he called to her as she went out. He could hear her clattering up the stairs. . . .

AT NINE o'clock the bank opened.

The first customer was Dr. Lawrence. He set his suitcase down and shoved a check at the teller.

The teller looked up. "That's quite a sum, doctor!"

Dr. Lawrence nodded. "Almost all the money I have in the bank."

He took the sheaf of bills that was passed to him and carefully tucked it in an inside coat pocket. When he left the bank he went directly to the railroad station.

It was only a two block walk to the depot as the entire town was centered around the square on which the bank, drug store and a few other business establishments were located. The ninety-three to Chicago was on time and the doctor clambered aboard. Inside, he seated himself and settled down to the seven hour trip.

His watch said four-twenty-five as the train swung past the mammoth Merchandise Mart and rolled along the river to chug into the bowels of Union Station.

Two heavy set men watched the crowd pour from the train and swing up the ramp toward the station doors. As the tall man with the goatee neared them they left the door and walked down the ramp toward him.

"Dr. Lawrence?" one asked.

"Why . . . yes . . . How did you know?"

They had separated to flank him on either side. The man who had spoken pulled something from his pocket and waved it at the doctor. "Chicago Po-

lice," he said.

"I don't understand. What would the Chicago police want with me?"

"Not a thing. It's Willow Green that wants you."

"Willow Green? What for?"

"Murder."

* * *

"Someone to see you, doc."

The old man looked up at the jailer dumbly and nodded. The turnkey unlocked the door and the man who had been waiting in the corridor entered.

"Jim Ward! What are you doing here?"

"Visiting a client, I hope."

The doctor stared at him. "But I didn't hire you!"

"No. Nor anyone else, either." Ward sounded bitter. "There isn't a lawyer around here who will touch the case and you know it."

It was true. The doctor had tried several and found they were all "too busy."

Ward sat down on the bunk next to the doctor and put his hand on the old man's knee. "Listen to me, doctor. If you don't accept my services you'll have to take a public defender. Or get someone from Chicago. You know how much interest they'd have in you."

The doctor noted Ward's trembling hands, his red-rimmed eyes. "But man, you're in no condition to take a case!"

"I know. But still a better man than any other you could get." His hand gripped the old man's thigh. "Believe me, doctor. I *was* once a fine lawyer. No use going into the reasons for my fall. It's enough to say that I want more than anything in the world the chance to defend you."

The doctor smiled wanly. "What can I lose? From the little I've been able to find out I'm as good as con-

victed. I suppose that's the real reason I can't get a lawyer. It will take a miracle to save me."

"The same miracle can save me."

Ward shook the doctor's hand. "I hope neither of us regrets it. Now tell me everything you can about it."

"I am afraid," the doctor said, "that you know more than I."

Ward summed up his information, then looked at the doctor. "Can you add anything to that?"

"Nothing."

Ward cursed. "That's the trouble with these hick town cases. You can't get a line on the prosecution. Well, I'm certain you're not guilty and I intend to prove it."

He left the doctor staring gloomily at the cell walls. . . .

"**A**ND the state will prove that the defendant, for motives to be shown, did, at the hour of noon, on Monday, the eleventh day of June, 1945," Breedin was saying to the jury, "murder his nurse, Clara Howe."

There was a murmur from the jammed courtroom. It seemed that all Willow Green, which had no courthouse, had journeyed to Prairie Grove.

Breedin turned slightly to give his constituents a better look at his profile.

Jim Ward's shabby figure rose. "The defense," he told Judge Peters, "has no statement."

Breedin's voice was smooth and powerful in contrast to Ward's harshness. "Call Milo Forbes to the stand," he said.

Forbes was a square-set man who operated the delivery service in Willow Green. He squirmed in the chair.

"Please tell the court where you were at noon, on the eleventh of June, 1945," Breedin requested.

"I was in my truck at the corner of Second Street and Vine."

"That is four blocks from the square?"

"That's right."

"Please relate to the court exactly what happened at that time."

"Like I said, I was in my truck. I'd just pulled up to see if my load was secure. Well, sir, I happened to look over at the little hedge that's around the Harris place and thought I saw somethin'. I went on over to see and found Miss Clara Howe lyin' behind the hedge, unconscious."

"She was not dead?"

"No, still breathin', but fast and very weak."

"What did you do then?" Breedin asked.

"I yelled out for Mrs. Harris but she was busy on the phone . . ."

Ward objected. "Unless the witness saw Mrs. Harris that is hearsay."

Judge Peters ordered it stricken and instructed the witness. "Tell only what you saw."

"Well, anyway, I had to yell a couple of times before she came to the window. When she saw Miss Howe she let out a shriek. Then she came around the back door, and between us we got her in the house. While Mrs. Harris put cold towels on Miss Howe's head I tried to call the doctor. He wasn't at his office, and when I called Mrs. Wilson she said he'd gone out of town. So I called Prairie Grove and got Dr. Verne. He said he'd be there soon as he could but in the meantime I should get Phelps, the druggist."

"I called the drug store but Charlie, that's Phelps, was home eatin'. By the time I got him and he come over, Miss Howe was dying."

Breedin thanked him. "Your witness," he told Ward.

Ward leaned on the little gate before the stand and looked up at Forbes. "Could you tell, from the position of

the body, whether Miss Howe had fallen or had been pushed or placed behind the hedge?"

Forbes frowned. "I'd say she'd fallen. Some of the branches were broken and she was lyin' just inside the hedge. Fact is, a corner of her dress was caught on a branch."

"But if she had been struck a blow at the outer edge of the walk she might have reeled back and fallen in just about the same way?"

Forbes looked startled. "I . . . I suppose so."

Breedin was on his feet. "Objection, your honor. That is pure guess-work."

The judge nodded. "Sustained."

WARD waived further cross examination and Breedin called Mrs. George Harris to the stand. She was an angular woman who spoke in a shrill voice.

"Clara Howe was a friend of mine," she told the court. "Every day, after she'd had her lunch, exactly at eleven-thirty, that would be, she'd take a walk. At just about five to twelve she would stop by my house to chat for a few minutes. I always waited at the window for her."

"Well, when I heard Milo yelling for me I just knew something had happened to Clara. She was a sick woman, you know. I ran to the window and looked out and there she was, all sprawled out just inside the hedge."

"Then I ran around the back way—it was closer—and Milo and I picked her up between us—she was hardly breathing—and we carried her in and put her on the bed. Milo tried to get the doctor while I applied cold cloths. At last, Charlie Phelps came and not long after him Dr. Verne arrived. But it was too late."

Breedin turned the witness over to Ward.

"You say you heard Mr. Forbes calling to you?"

"Well, maybe not the first time he called—I was talking to Marie Ferris . . ."

There was laughter from the courtroom. Willow Green was aware of Mrs. Ferris's ability as a telephone monologist.

Judge Peters pounded his gavel. "Silence in the courtroom!" The laughter subsided.

Jim Ward resumed his questioning. "Then you can't be sure that it wasn't his *first* call that you heard?"

"No . . . not sure."

"That is all."

The next witness caused a stir. The prosecution was bringing up its big guns. Charlie Phelps was called to the stand and duly sworn in.

"Your name and occupation?"

Phelps answered nervously.

"Please tell us what you can about the occurrences on the day mentioned."

Phelps thought for a moment. "I guess I'd better start at the beginning. I'd decided to go home for lunch and about eleven-thirty I left the store. There were a few fellows in front and I stopped to talk to them."

"While I was talking Clara Howe came down from the office upstairs and walked off toward Second Street. A few minutes later I left. I live off at the other side of town and it takes me about ten minutes to get home."

"Well, I hadn't been eating more than five minutes when the phone rang. It was Milo Forbes. He was all excited and I couldn't make out what he was saying at first but I finally got it."

"I left my dinner unfinished and rushed over to Mrs. Harris' house but there was nothing I could do for Clara. She breathed her last just after I got there. When Dr. Verne arrived a few minutes later she was dead."

Breedin thought that over for a few seconds.

"Why should you have been called, Mr. Phelps?" he asked. "After all, you are not a doctor."

"Well, being a pharmacist I know more about medicine and first-aid than anyone else in Willow Green except the doctor."

"Yet you were unable to help at all?"

"That's right. As I said, Clara died within a minute or two after I got to Mrs. Harris' house."

"Thank you, Mr. Phelps. Your witness, Mr. Ward."

Ward took a long time before starting his cross-examination and the judge had to quiet the courtroom. At last Ward began.

"You say you are possessed of a good knowledge of medicine?"

"For one who is not a doctor, yes."

"Will you elaborate on that statement, please."

PHELPS looked puzzled. "Well . . .

Of course, I have a good knowledge of drugs and their uses. Many of the people who bring in prescriptions to be filled tell me what the doctor said was ailing them. After as many years as I've been in the drug business a man gets so that he could just about prescribe for most common complaints."

"That is called, in the trade, counter-prescribing?"

"Yes."

"And you sometimes do that?"

"Never! It is highly unethical, besides the fact that I am *not* a doctor and would not want to take the responsibility involved."

"Then on any medical question you would not set yourself up as an authority?"

"Certainly not!"

"Then you would hesitate to say definitely what you thought was the cause

of Miss Howe's death?"

Phelps had to ponder that for a while. "Well, I knew the nature of her illness because she purchased her medicine from me. I also know that her death exhibited all the symptoms of that illness. I would say she died of insulin shock!"

"But you have just stated that you are not an authority! You could be wrong?"

"I . . . I suppose so."

"That is all, thank you."

The next witness was Clarence Waters, a teller in the Willow Green bank.

"You know Dr. Lawrence well, Mr. Waters?" Breedin asked.

"Yes."

"Did you see him on June eleventh?"

"Yes. He was the first person at my window that day. He drew out most of the money he had in the bank. He even mentioned that fact himself."

"How large a sum did he withdraw?"

"One thousand dollars."

"Did he mention to you the reason for the withdrawal?"

"No, although to tell the truth I was curious. He had accumulated the money over a period of time and I wondered why he should take it all out at once. He might just as well have used a check instead of carrying that much money around."

"So Dr. Lawrence had a checking account?"

"Yes."

At this point Breedin produced Dr. Lawrence's check made out to cash for one thousand dollars and offered it as evidence. It was passed to the jury.

Ward waived cross-examination, and the State called a Fred Fox to the stand.

"Tell us where you live, Mr. Fox."

"In Prairie Grove."

"In town?"

"No. The township is called Prairie

Grove. I farm an eighty acre place about ten miles out of town." The farmer was obviously uncomfortable in his Sunday suit. He had bought it years before and now his broad shoulders fairly burst from it.

"Please tell the court what happened to you on June eleventh?"

"Well, I was out in the field till about seven-thirty. Then my tractor broke down. It's an old one but I've kept it going sort of patched-up. This time I could see that I'd need some parts. I didn't want to go into town so I figured I'd run over to Sam Byrd's and see if he wouldn't help me out."

Breedin interrupted. "Who is Sam Byrd?"

"He's—or was—a crazy old coot who lived down the road a piece."

"In what sense do you mean the word 'crazy'?"

"Well, maybe not crazy, but queer, anyway. He was sort of a hermit. Lived out on his farm all by himself and came into town just on Saturday night to get the few things he needed for the week. Outside of that he didn't go anywhere and nobody came to see him. He had no kin that we ever heard about."

"When you say he went into town do you mean Prairie Grove?"

FOX grinned. "No, Willow Green.

Prairie Grove was closer but he wouldn't buy there. Some years ago he'd bought a tractor in Prairie Grove. Well, him not knowing anything about machinery and not taking care of it, it soon broke down. He always said he'd been cheated and that everyone in Prairie Grove was a crook."

"The tractor was never repaired?"

"No. He let it rot out in his yard. Had a couple of horses he used for his work. Couple of farmers offered to buy the tractor but he wouldn't sell."

"What made you think he would sell

you the parts you needed?"

"I just hoped he would. Didn't want to go to town if I could help it. Besides, being an old model, the dealer might not have the parts I needed and I'd have to wait till he got them. It was worth a try because old Sam's was the same make as mine."

"So you went directly to Byrd's place?"

"I went back to the house and got the car and drove over. It was just about quarter to eight when I got there. I didn't see him around so I went up to his door and yelled in. I thought it was strange he wasn't around some place so I went in for a look.

"He was there, all right. Stone dead . . . laid out on the floor all twisted up and stiff as a board!"

"Then what did you do?"

"Well, there wasn't a phone there so I drove home and called Dr. Verne. He was in and said he'd be right out. I went back and waited till he got there. He looked kind of funny when he saw old Sam stretched out that way. Then he looked around and saw a bottle of medicine on a shelf and opened it and smelled it and tasted it. He stuck the bottle in his pocket and I helped him get the body in his car and he took it into Prairie Grove."

The prosecutor let Fox catch his breath. Then he asked, "Was there anything strange about the position of the body when you found it?"

"Yes. Not only about the body but about the room itself. At first I thought he might have been killed in a fight because a chair was knocked over and some stuff thrown around. His body was sort of bent backwards and twisted half around. I didn't touch him but I couldn't see any marks on him that looked like a fight. Also, there was no blood."

"Thank you, Mr. Fox. Your witness,

counselor."

Ward did not cross-examine and the next witness was called.

"Dr. Verne to the stand!"

The doctor was a slightly younger man than Dr. Lawrence. He was clean-shaven and had a prosperous look. He spoke in an impatient manner. Breedin handled him respectfully.

"Your name and occupation, please."

"Thomas Verne. I am a physician in Prairie Grove. I am also the coroner of the county."

"Please tell us exactly what occurred on Monday, June, eleventh."

"At seven o'clock in the morning I removed a child's tonsils. It was the only operation I had that day and I was preparing to visit several of my patients who were in the hospital when I received a call from Fred Fox to come out to Byrd's farm at once. I left immediately."

"Tell us what you found there."

"Fred Fox was waiting for me when I arrived and led me at once to the kitchen. There I found Sam Byrd. He was dead."

"Could you tell how long he was dead at the time?"

"About two days."

"Was there anything strange about the state of the corpse?"

"Yes. It was obvious that he had not died a natural death. His body was arched backward in the manner characteristic of victims of strychnine poisoning. Several times I have been called in cases of strychnine poisoning and so am quite familiar with it.

"I NOTICED a bottle of medicine on a shelf. Byrd had apparently taken some. I opened the bottle and got a little on my finger and tasted it. There was little doubt that it was strychnine. It has a very bitter taste.

"With the aid of Fox I got the body

in my car and took it into Prairie Grove. I there performed an autopsy and found that Byrd had indeed died of strychnine poisoning. The bottle of medicine, when analyzed, showed an amount of the drug that was certainly lethal.

"Having noticed that it had been prescribed by Dr. Lawrence I tried to call him but was informed by his nurse that he would not return until the following day. She would not give me any information in his absence."

"What happened next?"

"That was about twelve o'clock. I received a call from Willow Green that Clara Howe had been found unconscious and apparently close to death. I told them to get Phelps, the pharmacist, to give what help he could and that I would come as soon as possible. I drove the twenty miles to Willow Green in about fifteen minutes but I was too late."

"Miss Howe was dead when you arrived?"

"That is correct. I questioned Mrs. Harris and Mr. Forbes about her condition when she was found. She had apparently been in a coma for a short time. Then Mr. Phelps informed me that Miss Howe had been a diabetic. Their description of her death made it evident that she had either been in a diabetic coma or in insulin shock."

"Is it not possible to distinguish between the two?"

"It is sometimes difficult. But in this case there was still a faint acid odor noticeable about the woman's mouth which is characteristic of those suffering from insulin shock."

"Will you please explain to the court the difference between the two conditions and how they might be brought about?"

"Well, in insulin shock the condition is caused by an overdose of that drug. In the other case the coma is caused by

the opposite condition—that is, where the patient has not taken insulin or has taken an insufficient amount. The sugar content of the blood mounts and there is usually dizziness followed by coma if insulin is not administered soon."

"The injection of too large an amount of insulin would be followed quickly by shock?"

"Yes. In most cases within ten to fifteen minutes."

"And the results of not taking any?"

"That would be harder to say. It would depend on the condition of the patient how long it would take for the sugar content to rise high enough to cause collapse."

"Then in the case of too little the patient might more likely receive aid in time to save him?"

"That is right. In the case of shock, especially if there is a cardiac condition—a heart condition—and that often occurs in diabetics, the shock will result in death if care is not given at once."

Breedin thanked him. "To the layman those things are a dark mystery and in this case it is of vital importance that the jury have some understanding of the matter in order to reach a just verdict . . . Now will you please continue your account?"

"Knowing that Miss Howe had been Dr. Lawrence's nurse, I wondered how she, of all people, had slipped up. It sometimes happens that a diabetic takes an overdose but I was sure that a nurse would have been more careful."

"Then you had no suspicion that anything was amiss?"

"Not at the moment. It is not uncommon that overdoses are taken although they are not so often large enough to cause death."

"Please tell us what it was that made you look further than you otherwise

might have."

DR. VERNE hesitated for a moment. "I wish to make this clear so that you will understand it thoroughly," he explained. When he had his facts in order he continued. "Diabetes is caused by a high sugar content in the blood due to the failure of the liver to convert the sugar into glycogen, which can be burned by the body. Insulin is a drug obtained from the pancreas of cattle or hogs. This drug enables the liver to temporarily convert the sugar. But the drug is used up in the body so that frequent injections of it are necessary. Insulin is usually made in three strengths: twenty units to the cubic centimeter, or c.c., forty units to the c.c., and eighty units to the c.c.

"The amount of insulin a diabetic takes will vary according to his need. Usually two injections are taken daily. The most common dosage is one c.c. of either the twenty unit or forty unit injected twice daily. That would give forty and eighty units respectively a day. The eighty unit per c.c. is used only in severe cases.

"I asked Mr. Phelps if he knew in what amount Miss Howe had been taking her insulin. He informed me that she took three injections of the twenty unit a day. Most diabetics prefer to take only two injections a day but Mr. Phelps said that Miss Howe had once told him that because of a heart condition she felt safer in taking smaller doses.

"Now . . . if she had made a mistake and taken as much as two c.c.'s it is hardly likely that she would have gone into shock. It is hard to believe that she could have taken three c.c.'s at once.

"Therefore, I thought an investigation should be made. After Miss Howe's body had been removed Mr.

Phelps and Constable Brown went with me to Dr. Lawrence's office. The door had been left unlocked by Miss Howe. We easily found her bottle of insulin which she kept in the outer office.

"On closer examination we found that the bottle had been tampered with. Each concentration comes in a bottle with a different color label. That insures against mistakes. The label on this bottle had been changed!"

"How could you tell?" Breedin asked.

"There were small areas which were wrinkled and the entire label was loose. It looked as though it had been steamed from another bottle and glued on to that one."

"The label was from a bottle of twenty unit insulin?"

"That is right."

Breedin produced the bottle and submitted it as exhibit B. It was half full of a colorless liquid. The judge examined it and passed it on to the jurors.

Breedin got back to the doctor. "Will you continue, please?"

"At that point I decided to test the insulin in the bottle. It took just a little while; by dehydrating one c.c. of the liquid I got enough insulin precipitated. It was eighty unit insulin!"

"Now we were not dealing with an accidental overdose! It was plain that Miss Howe had not changed the label. The obvious conclusion was that the bottle had been exchanged for hers by someone who wanted her to get an overdose . . . *an amount four times as great as she would normally have taken!* In short, gentlemen, she had been murdered!"

THE courtroom was a babble of confused exclamations. Judge Peters pounded his gavel until it seemed it would break.

"Silence in the courtroom!" he

roared. "Silence! Or I shall order the courtroom cleared!"

While order was being restored the judge mopped his brow. At last he nodded to Dr. Verne to resume his testimony.

"At the time, it was impossible to point out anyone as the most likely suspect," the doctor continued. "Just a few minutes later I happened to mention that this was the second time that day that I found a person dead of an overdose of a drug. I told Phelps and the constable about Sam Byrd's death. Since I knew that Phelps had filled the prescription I asked him, to verify my own analysis, how much strychnine had been in it. He could not remember but said he could easily look it up."

"We went to his drug store and he got the prescription from his files. It called for a 3 per cent solution of strychnine sulphate to be taken in one teaspoon doses three times a day."

Breedin produced the prescription as exhibit C and it was accepted and passed to the jury.

"Will you please explain to the jury what the symbols on the prescription mean?" the prosecutor asked Dr. Verne. The doctor obliged.

R

Sol. Strych Sulph 3% 3—SS

Sig. 5 \dot{T} tid.

"The abbreviations 'Sol. Strych. Sulph.' stand for 'Solution Strychnine Sulphate'," the doctor pointed out to the jury. "The sign for '3 per cent' is the strength which the doctor prescribed. The symbol which looks like a 'three with a curving tail' means ounces. Next to that you see a line, under which are two 'S.' That means one-half ounce."

"Taken as a whole the first line of that prescription means, simply, 'one-half ounce of a 3 per cent solution of

strychnine sulphate'. Under that line you see the following: 'Sig.'; what looks like a 'Z'; then what seems like a 'T' with a dot over it; and finally the letters 'tid'. That line means: 'To be taken—one teaspoon three times a day'. The 'Z' is the symbol for 'teaspoon'."

"Thank you, doctor," Breedin said. He turned to the jury and asked, "Do you understand that perfectly?" They all nodded and Breedin turned to the doctor.

"Is there anything unusual about that prescription?"

"I should say there is! One teaspoon of 3 per cent strychnine sulphate contains two grains of strychnine. That means certain death!"

"Shouldn't a doctor know that?"

"Of course! The only explanation I could think of was that Dr. Lawrence had meant to write the symbol 'Gtt' which would have stood for 'drop'. Then we would have had 'Take one *drop* three times a day! A drop of that solution would have contained only one-thirtieth of a grain of strychnine, a normal dose."

"A simple mistake. Have you ever made a mistake like that, Dr. Verne?"

"Thank God, no!"

Breedin stared at him. "Why are you so vehement, doctor?"

"Why . . . outside the fact that I would have killed someone . . . it would mean the end of my career! Even if I did not lose my license I certainly would lose my practice!"

"If you ever made a mistake like that would you not try to conceal it?"

"Objection!" Ward was on his feet, shouting. "That question was both leading and prejudicial!"

"Sustained!" Judge Peters gave Breedin a scolding look. "You know better than to ask a question like that! Please see to it that it does not happen again."

BREEDIN tried another tack. "It is known that Sam Byrd came into town only once a week, on Saturday evening. If he had failed to do so the following week it would hardly have been noticed. His body might not have been discovered for two weeks or more. In that case, would you have been able to determine the cause of death?"

"In that case the body would have been in a state of decomposition which would have concealed the cause of death from the naked eye, and if there were no signs of violence I would have assumed that he had died of natural causes, say a heart attack."

"Thank you. Go on, please."

"Mr. Phelps told me that Dr. Lawrence kept duplicate copies, carbons, of his prescriptions. We found a small green filing box on Miss Howe's desk. It contained carbons of prescriptions written by the doctor in June. There were several from the Saturday previous, the ninth of June. But Byrd's was missing!"

"How could you be certain of that?" Breedin asked.

"The carbons were all numbered. There was one number skipped."

"I see."

"That seemed to me conclusive evidence of a carefully planned crime and I at once informed the constable of my suspicions. He immediately called the proper authorities and a call was made to Chicago asking the police there to seize Dr. Lawrence as soon as he arrived.

"I testified to the things I have just stated here at the time Dr. Lawrence was indicted."

Breedin wore a confident smile as he turned the witness over to the counsel for the defense.

Jim Ward had not taken a drink in two weeks and his eyes were clearer than anyone in Willow Green could re-

member seeing them. His voice was still hoarse and his hands trembled slightly as he prepared to cross-examine.

"Dr. Verne, you stated that Miss Howe had died of insulin shock. You also stated that the victim was also suffering from a heart ailment. What was the nature of that heart condition?"

"Arteriosclerosis. A hardening of the heart arteries. The condition is often found in diabetics."

"Would a strong shock or fright be sufficient to cause the death of a person suffering from that heart condition?"

"It certainly would."

"Then . . . although Miss Howe may have been in shock caused by the overdose of insulin it is possible that she may actually have died of a heart attack?"

Breedin objected vigorously. "The defense has brought no evidence to show the least probability of such a thing."

Judge Peters sustained him and ordered the question stricken.

Ward tried another question. "Are you prepared to swear, doctor, that the cause—the sole cause—of Miss Howe's death was insulin poisoning?"

But his previous question had done its work. Dr. Verne hesitated before replying. He looked up at the judge. "I don't feel that a simple 'yes' or 'no' could answer that. May I be permitted to answer at length?"

He was told that he could.

"I am positive that Miss Howe had enough insulin in her to have thrown her into shock. I am also prepared to swear that it was sufficient to have caused her death. But . . . there is always the possibility, no matter how remote, that she died of a heart attack before the insulin had killed her."

"There is a great difference between the penalties for murder and *attempted*

murder! That difference may be the one between life and death! I must insist on a direct answer. Are you *certain* that Miss Howe's death was caused by the insulin?"

"No!"

The judge pounded his gavel but there was no hope of quieting the courtroom. The doctor's reply had been the match applied to the gunpowder.

"Court will adjourn until tomorrow morning at ten o'clock," Judge Peters announced, and fled the bench . . .

JIM WARD was weary as he rode the bus back to Willow Green. He realized how little Dr. Verne's refusal to give an affirmative answer to his question might prove to mean in the final analysis.

There was no doubt that it had shaken the jury. Ward could have sworn that they had already convicted Dr. Lawrence in their minds before the trial had begun. At least he had implanted some feeling of uncertainty in their hearts, although how far from the legal "reasonable doubt" it was he well knew. Still, if the effect had not worn off by the end of the trial it might save the doctor's life. More than that he could hardly hope for.

The web of evidence, circumstantial though it was, seemed too tightly drawn about the doctor. And the worst of it was that every movement the doctor had made added another strand to that web!

Ward had a mind to keep the doctor off the stand. He toyed with the idea but gave it up. What could he hope to gain? The longer the trial lasted, the better. Something might turn up, though he hardly knew what. Ward had already made his decision. There was no hope for an acquittal so his only chance lay in a dogged insistence on the one point he had made, or could make.

It was late in the evening when he appeared at the drug store. The group in front looked at him respectfully and some would have spoken had he not pushed past them. Phelps was busy and he had to wait.

"Give me a couple of benzedrine tablets," Ward told the druggist when he appeared.

"Burning the midnight oil, eh?" the druggist laughed. "Well . . ." His shrug said he held little hope for Ward's success.

Fred Clark came in, mumbling to himself.

"What's eatin' you?" Phelps asked him.

"Lost forty cents," Clark announced.

"In here?"

"Practically," the miser told him. "Remember I came in last Monday to borry a pen and a blotter? Well, I was sendin' in a payment. I got the letter back next day because I forgot to write in part of the address. Time I sent it back was a day late and I lost my discount. Forty cents gone to hell!"

Phelps grinned. "If you didn't wait till the last day to make your payments that wouldn't happen."

Ward felt disgusted with their talk of forty cents. He had a man's life to save, and he knew he would be up most of the night trying to think of a way to do it. He left without getting his tablets. . . .

IT WAS with many misgivings that Jim Ward called Dr. Lawrence to the stand. The old man's shoulders were bowed as he took his oath. He answered questions and gave his testimony in a quiet, hopeless tone.

"My name is Phillip Lawrence," he said; "I am a physician in the village of Willow Green."

"Please tell us the reasons for your actions on Monday, June eleventh."

"I had received some mail a few weeks before advertising new electrical equipment for physicians. The firm which manufactures and sells them is well known. Their offices are in Chicago and I decided to go there to see their equipment.

"I had a little money saved and thought there would be no better use for it than to put it into equipment which would give Willow Green better medical service.

"On the morning in question I withdrew from the bank one thousand dollars. I had already arranged to have that day free. I took the train to Chicago and was there arrested and returned to Willow Green."

The doctor's voice was barely audible as he ended his brief statement. Ward waited a moment before questioning him. "Will you please tell us the condition for which you prescribed strychnine for Mr. Byrd?"

"He had myocarditis, a heart ailment. The strychnine was a stimulant. I wanted to prescribe tablets but Mr. Byrd said he could not take pills of any kind so I gave him the liquid instead."

"Are you certain that the prescription offered as evidence was the one you gave Mr. Byrd?"

"Yes, there can be no question of that. It is in my own handwriting. Still, I find it impossible to believe that I could have made such a mistake. As you can tell, by the fact that I keep carbon copies of all my prescriptions, I am very careful."

"Was there anything unusual about the circumstances under which you gave the prescription to Mr. Byrd?"

"Yes. Just as I had finished writing it I received an emergency call. There had been an auto accident on the road just outside of town. I grabbed my bag and ran from the office, telling Miss Howe, on my way out, to tear out the

prescription and give it to Mr. Byrd and to collect my fee from him."

"Then it was Miss Howe who really gave him the prescription?"

"Yes."

"Was Miss Howe familiar with medicines?"

"Yes. She took an inordinate interest in medicine. She read medical books constantly. I suppose it was because she had been ill so long herself. Of course, that made her an excellent assistant for a doctor."

"She had a serious heart condition herself?"

"Yes. She was able to do only the lightest work. In my opinion, it would have been only a short time until she would have had to stop working altogether."

"Would she have known the uses and dangers of strychnine?"

"Yes. She was as well acquainted with toxicology, the study of poisons, as most physicians."

"It was her job to file the carbon copies of your prescriptions?"

"Yes. Every Saturday evening she filed the copies of the past week in a small box on her desk. At the end of each month they were filed in regular cases in my own office. That made them immediately available if I had to consult them."

"How did it happen that Miss Howe bought her insulin from Mr. Phelps? Did you not have any which she might have obtained free?"

"Physicians usually receive free, from the drug manufacturers, all kinds of products. However, the potency of insulin may be lost if it is kept too long or is improperly sealed. Therefore, I advised her to purchase hers from Phelps. Besides, I had only a few bottles from assorted manufacturers and they would not have lasted long. Then, too, she received a discount from

the druggist because she worked for me."

"Is there any special way in which insulin injections are taken?"

"Yes. The syringe must be sterilized first. Miss Howe used my sterilizer for the purpose. She took three shots a day; one in the morning, one just before lunch, and one in the evening."

"Is yours a steam sterilizer?"

"Yes."

"Could a label be steamed off with it?"

"Easily."

"If Miss Howe had decided to take a bottle of your insulin would you have noticed it?"

"Hardly. All those medicines were kept in an open closet. There were so many which had accumulated there that I would never have missed one. In fact, I did not know how many bottles there were."

"Was Miss Howe very careful?"

"Very. Like many non-medical people who know a great deal about diseases she was in constant fear of catching one. She was also afraid of infections and used every possible precaution to avoid them. Of course, to a diabetic, infection is a very dangerous thing."

"Would she have sterilized a bottle of your insulin if she had decided to take one in your absence?"

THE doctor permitted himself the ghost of a smile. "I am sure she would."

Breedin objected. "Counsel for the defense is introducing irrelevant material."

"The defense is introducing evidence which will show that there was much greater likelihood of unintentional suicide than there was of murder."

Judge Peters considered that awhile. "In a case where a man's life may be

at stake I believe that the defense should be allowed the greatest latitude. You may continue your examination, counselor."

Ward returned to Dr. Lawrence. "What do you know of Miss Howe's financial condition?"

"She was very poor. The job she held barely supported her, and she often had to borrow from me. What the poor woman would do when she had to stop working I do not know."

"She might have tried to save on her medicine?"

"Often she had suggested that she use the insulin I had but I told her it might be a very costly economy."

"Did you know, doctor," Ward asked in a low, but clear tone, "That Clara Howe was a niece of Sam Byrd's and his only living relative?"

The doctor's face mirrored the astonishment of the spectators and jury. It was evident that it was the first anyone there had heard of the relationship.

"No . . . I had no idea . . ." the doctor stammered.

Ward produced a sheaf of records. "These are from the town of Barret, Wisconsin. It was there that Sam Byrd and his sister, Clara Howe's mother, were born. Sam Byrd left his birthplace when he was a young man and his family lost track of him. Years later, Clara Howe came to Willow Green, unaware that her uncle lived there. In fact, she did not know she had an uncle.

"About a month ago Miss Howe wrote to the recorder's office at Barret in an attempt to find some relative. Probably she hoped to secure financial aid if she succeeded. Here is the letter she received in reply on Saturday, June ninth. There is also a photostatic copy of her request for information."

The jury studied the papers. They were a complete record of the Byrd

family. There was complete proof that Sam Byrd had indeed been Clara Howe's uncle!

Ward resumed his questioning. "Is it not just as likely, doctor, that instead of making the mistake of writing 'teaspoon' when you meant to write 'drop,' you omitted to write either in your excitement?"

"At least as likely."

"Did you ever file your carbons yourself?"

"No. Miss Howe always filed them. I never had occasion to refer to them but continued to file them as a precaution."

"Then you would never know that there was a carbon missing?"

"No."

"You have heard Dr. Verne testify to the fact that if Byrd's body had not been discovered for several weeks it would have been impossible to tell what had killed him. Do you concur?"

"No. What he actually said was that if two weeks had passed there would have been no visible evidence of the poisoning. There would still be traces of it in the victim's body. Of course, there would have been little chance of an autopsy."

"Thank you, doctor. Your witness, counselor."

BREEDIN got out his notes and consulted them before beginning his cross-examination.

"It has been testified that you had a checking account in the Willow Green bank. That is correct?"

"Yes."

"Then why did you take cash with you to Chicago when it would have been easier and safer to have paid by check?"

"Perhaps I am old-fashioned, but I prefer to pay with cash."

"Then why have a checking account?"

You had no intention of caching the money in Chicago and returning for it at a later date if your crime was discovered?"

The doctor grew livid. "I had committed no crime and my trip to Chicago was for the purpose I have stated!"

"Can you offer any proof of that!"

The doctor was silent and Breedin sneered. "I thought not! You have stated that you were always very careful and that you can hardly believe that you might have made such a serious mistake. Have you never in the past made a mistake?"

"Never!"

Breedin looked like the proverbial cat and it seemed that Dr. Lawrence was the canary.

"Before you came to Willow Green you had been practicing in Yerez, Texas, had you not?" Breedin shot at him.

The doctor turned pasty. He looked like he had seen a ghost.

"Objection!" Ward shouted. "The doctor's previous practice is entirely irrelevant to this case!"

"The defense," Breedin retorted, "Has built up the impression that Dr. Lawrence was an extremely careful man, unlikely to make a mistake. The prosecution will show that he was nothing of the sort!"

"Objection overruled," the judge decreed. "The prosecution will continue its cross-examination."

"Will the defendant answer my question?" Breedin demanded.

"Yes," the doctor said. "I was in practice there."

"And did you not have a patient in the year nineteen-forty whose name was Armando Gomez?"

The doctor's head was sunk on his chest and his reply was barely audible. "I did."

"And did he not die from an overdose

of a drug administered by you?"

"Yes."

"And is that the reason you were forced to give up your practice in Yerez?"

Breedin was hammering the questions at the doctor as though they were physical blows. The old man had shrunk into his chair as though by doing so he could avoid Breedin's fury. His eyes held a hopeless look as he was forced to give affirmative answers to the questions which sealed his doom.

"Yes," the doctor replied wearily to the last question. "I had to leave Yerez and came to Willow Green to make a new start."

"How old are you, Dr. Lawrence?" Breedin asked.

"Sixty-three."

"If you were forced to leave Willow Green do you think you could establish yourself somewhere else?"

"Objection! The question is immaterial, irrelevant . . ."

"Sustained."

Breedin smiled at Ward's objection. His point had been made. "That is all," he told the doctor. Ward had to assist the old man to his seat.

"You should have told me about Yerez," Ward said to the doctor.

Dr. Lawrence shook his head wanly. "What good would that have done? You've done the best you could—even better than I expected—but I'm afraid that we never really had a chance."

"That depends on how good Breedin is. If . . ."

THE doctor interrupted Ward. "You mean my life may be spared?" The old man was bitter. "So that I may spend my remaining years in prison? No! Far better for me to die than to rot in a cell, knowing that I was innocent."

It was true, Ward reflected. How

much more merciful a quick death would be! And yet it was his duty to try to save the doctor from that so he could suffer the horrors of imprisonment!

The defense attorney listened to Breedin as the prosecutor addressed the jury. He had to admit that Breedin was a capable man, if not a brilliant one. He was pointing out every flaw in the defense.

"The defense," Breedin was saying, "has used an imagination that would be more valuable to the movie-makers than in a court of law. In law we must deal in facts!

"And what has been the defense? A slander on a woman who was dead and unable to defend herself! Of course, the defense did not say so in that many words, but if the gaps in the fantasy it wove were filled it would amount to this:

"That Miss Howe, having discovered that Sam Byrd was her uncle, appealed to him for help; that he refused, and that she, therefore, poisoned him in order to gain his estate; that she attempted to sterilize a bottle of insulin and made a mistake in replacing the label she had steamed off."

Breedin smiled. "To take the last point first: it is plain that to have switched labels Miss Howe would have had to have two bottles, one of eighty unit strength, something that would be of no use to her!

Secondly, and the point on which the defense exercised even greater imagination and which it tried to make by implication: that Miss Howe asked her uncle for help and that he refused. Not one thing was *proved*, unless that necessity is the mother of invention and that the defense's power of invention is great!"

The courtroom tittered in appreciation and Breedin went on. "Then the

defense suggested that the mistake Dr. Lawrence made was that he omitted an important symbol. This is direct contradiction to the defendant's own admission that the entire prescription is in his own handwriting!

"To conceive of such a chain of circumstances and coincidences would tax any but the most fertile imagination. I would suggest that counsel for the defense take himself to Hollywood where his talents can be properly rewarded. To sway a jury composed of men of common sense by such fantasy is impossible!

"There is one more point which the defense tried to make. It is one which every school-boy knows is fallacious. That is the idea that we can never be *certain* of anything. We cannot be certain, in that sense, that the sun will rise tomorrow morning!

"Counsel for the defense was able, by putting it in terms of 'certainty', to get Dr. Verne to say that, although Miss Howe was dying from insulin shock and that the overdose of that drug was more than sufficient to kill her, it was '*possible*' for her to have died of a heart attack first.

"That is not what the court means when it says 'beyond a *reasonable* doubt'."

Ward could see that Breedin's lesson in logic was succeeding. The jury was sold, and he had nothing in his bag which would unsell them. He looked around to see how the courtroom was taking it.

The spectators were drinking it in. Some looked as though they were drooling in anticipation of the verdict. The lust for blood, Ward decided, was but thinly covered by the veneer of civilization.

Even Fred Clark had taken the day off to attend! Jim Ward wondered idly whether he had paid bus fare to Prairie

Grove or whether he had been able to cadge a ride. Even Fred Clark!

Ward's eyes widened as the miser's name brought a flow of associations to his mind. His mouth opened in a foolish smile as they formed a vague pattern that quickly grew to a complete picture, every detail of which was clear and bold.

JUDGE PETERS' gavel awoke Ward from his reverie. Breedin had finished his plea and the court was waiting for Ward. He saw Dr. Lawrence sitting across the table, head still bowed. The lawyer went to the doctor's side and bent to whisper something in his ear.

Whatever it was that Ward had said, it brought an unbelieving look from his client which followed him as he took his stand before the jury box.

"The prosecution," Ward began, "has upbraided the defense for slandering a woman who is dead and so unable to defend herself. I say that to do injustice to the living is a far greater crime. The dead are beyond suffering. They are beyond our prosecution and our persecution.

"The defense does not mean to imply that there has been in this case deliberate persecution. It does say that there has been a subconscious desire on the part of the prosecution to believe that Dr. Lawrence was guilty, a desire which made it seize on him, because he was the first to be suspected, and which prevented it from seeing the facts with an open mind.

"And why not? Was he not the stranger and, therefore, already suspect? Much as we like to believe ourselves open-minded and willing to give every man a fair trial we are indeed quite the opposite.

"What proof have I for such an indictment? The fact that every bit of

evidence brought to light has pointed in one direction, and only one, to the prosecution. From the moment the crime was discovered all clues led to Dr. Lawrence.

"Why? Was there no other direction in which they might point? Indeed there was! And more than one!

"Then what kept the prosecution from exploring these other avenues? Several things which are common to the minds of all men. One of these I have already mentioned, the fear of the stranger. The other is the unwillingness of the mind to do any work which it is not forced to do. In this case a suspect was ready at hand. Why look further?

"Fortunately the resistance of the mind can be overcome and the clues re-examined from a different point of view by a method which the prosecution has chosen to ridicule. That way is through the use of the imagination.

"The prosecution has implied that there is no place for that power of imagination in a court of law. Yet what else has it used? It has produced not one witness who actually *saw* Dr. Lawrence prescribe that poison! Nor has it produced one person who *saw* him change the labels on those bottles of insulin.

"Yet I dare say there is not one man in this courtroom who would not swear to the doctor's guilt! I must admit that I too have been remiss in my use of that power of imagination to interpret the facts in a different light. Luckily, there has been brought to my attention a clue which has forced me to re-examine the evidence and thereby prevent a miscarriage of justice."

Ward's shabby figure was clothed in a new dignity as he turned to the judge. Though his shoulders were still stooped he presented an appearance of confidence and the hoarseness of his voice

could not conceal its sureness.

"I beg the court's permission to introduce at this time new evidence in the defendant's behalf."

JUDGE PETERS studied Ward. "This is most unusual. However, if you are certain that you are in possession of information which will lead to the defendant's acquittal, I must, in justice, grant permission."

"It will not only prove the defendant's innocence," Ward told him. "But will disclose the identity of the murderer!"

"Call Fred Clark to the stand," Ward told the bailiff.

Clark was sworn in. The miser trembled as he took the oath. He was clearly at a loss as to why he had been called to the stand.

"On Monday, June eleventh, you borrowed a pen and blotter to address a letter. Is that correct?" Ward asked him.

Clark could only nod.

"What happened to that letter?"

"I got it back. I forgot to put in part of the address."

"And where," Ward demanded, "is that blotter?"

For a moment the miser was so confused that he could only splutter. At last, he became coherent.

"Why, right here in my pocket. I guess I forgot to give it back." He looked around the courtroom until he located Phelps. "I'm sorry, Charlie, I . . . I must have forgot and slipped it into my pocket by mistake."

Judge Peters laughed with the rest. "I don't think Mr. Phelps will prosecute," he told Clark.

Ward disregarded the laughter. "May I have the blotter?" he asked Clark.

Clark produced it, several times folded, from his pocket.

Ward unfolded it and showed it to

the jury. "This is just an ordinary blotter, as you can see. On one side it has an advertisement and on the other the blotting surface.

"You will soon see why I am so interested in this very ordinary object. But first, I wish to prove how right I was in a statement I made in my address to the jury.

"Mr. Clark has stated that a letter was returned to him because he forgot part of the address. No one challenged that assertion nor did it cause any lifting of eyebrows. Yet, when the defense suggested that Dr. Lawrence had omitted a symbol from the prescription he wrote, that suggestion was scoffed at.

"In truth, it would be highly improbable in either case. And in *neither case* did it happen!"

As the courtroom stared, bewildered, Ward tore from a notebook a sheet of paper and with a pen swiftly covered it with wavy lines. While the ink was still wet he placed the blotter over it. After a second or two he lifted the blotter and showed the paper to the jury. Every man gasped. A large part of the paper was again blank!

Before the jury could recover from their astonishment Ward went on. "There is the clue! Now for the theory which imagination can build from it.

"The startling effect you have just witnessed is caused by something most chemistry students know about. When an ink eradicator, notably oxalic acid, is poured onto a blotter and allowed to dry the crystals will remain on the blotter. The next time the blotter is placed on wet ink it will eradicate it.

"Therefore, someone must have been using oxalic acid and spilled it on the blotter not long before Mr. Clark borrowed it. If much time had elapsed it would have been noticed.

"Now, who in the drug store would have been using oxalic acid? Probably

Mr. Phelps. For what purpose? Probably to eradicate ink.

"It is not unlikely that he had made a mistake in writing and wanted to change it.

"But suppose he had made the mistake in reading! The prosecution, in its zeal to prove Dr. Lawrence guilty, seems to have forgotten that Mr. Phelps also handled that prescription!"

THE courtroom was in an uproar. Breedin tried to make himself heard above the shouting but had to give up. Judge Peters wisely decided to let the excitement run its course before trying to proceed. At last, there was a lull and the judge's gavel brought order. Breedin made his objection.

"Overruled!" the judge ordered. "From the color of Mr. Phelps' face I would say that the defense's shots are hitting close to the mark!"

Ward proceeded with his reconstruction of the event.

"Sam Byrd brought it in on a Saturday evening when the drug store was very crowded. Suppose Mr. Phelps, in a hurry, did not read it right. He would not notice it until later when he had occasion to file that prescription.

"By that time Sam Byrd would be dead. Of course, it was likely that no one would ever find out what killed him. But suppose someone did?

"That would be the end of Mr. Phelps' career in Willow Green! So Mr. Phelps' mistake had to be erased. That was simple; remove the symbol for 'drop' and substitute the symbol for 'teaspoon'. We can easily examine the prescription and prove that the substitution was made.

"But there was a copy of that prescription and who would know that better than the druggist? So the copy must either be altered or destroyed. That would be easy, were it not for Miss

Howe. She must have seen the prescription when she filed it. There was a good chance she would remember it and that might lead to an examination of the one that Phelps had changed.

"There was only one thing to do . . . make certain that Miss Howe would not remember! That would be easy for Mr. Phelps, who has such a knowledge of drugs and who knew all about Miss Howe's condition.

"There was a good chance to get away with it. And if something was suspected? The finger would point at Dr. Lawrence! Phelps has a son whom he would like to see established in Willow Green. If Dr. Lawrence were to be convicted of this crime the town would need a new doctor. How convenient for young Phelps!

"Notice that on the day of the murder Mr. Phelps decided to go home for lunch. Notice that this is so unusual that he mentioned it in his testimony! Yet he found time to stand in front of his store for fifteen minutes until Miss Howe had come down and gone! Was he making certain that he would be out of reach if she needed aid and he were called?"

Above Breedin's shouted objections and the pounding of the judge's gavel and the roar from the jammed courtroom it was impossible for Ward to be heard further. Nor was it necessary. The guilt was plainly written on the druggist's face. He tried to make a run for the door, but the crowd blocked his way, and before he could reach it the bailiff had him.

The jury did not bother to retire. The vote was taken in the box and Dr. Lawrence acquitted. The doctor accepted Breedin's apology willingly and graciously. When he had a moment with Jim Ward he said, "Well, it did seem like a miracle, didn't it?"

Ward could only nod silent agree-

ment. Someone offered his hand to the lawyer, and he looked up to see Breedin before him.

"So you finally got me in court," the prosecutor said, "and proved you were

the better man! No hard feelings, though. How about meeting me later for a drink to prove it?"

"Sure!" Ward told him. "If you don't mind making mine milk!"

THE END OF DEVIL'S ISLAND

DEVIL'S ISLAND—the world's most infamous penal colony—will soon be no more. For almost 100 years this settlement, known as the "living death," has existed, but within three years the French government has ordered it completely liquidated. No one would deny that to abolish Devil's Island is a worthy plan, long overdue. The colony has plagued France for many years. Authorities as well as the few inmates who succeeded in escaping have given accounts of the horrible conditions that prevailed there.

Yet a glance backward at the original penal settlement and its history reveals quite a different view of Devil's Island from the commonly accepted one. It presents an ironical note to the miserable situation that exists there and to the project of finally abandoning it.

In 1854, writing to a friend in France, one convict said of the Island, "Here is a tropical paradise." And so it was—then. In that year Napoleon III legalized the shipment of prisoners there, though the colony had been founded in 1852, when the first convoy arrived. Conditions were difficult in the France of that day, and the first people who arrived at the Guiana settlement were exiles rather than prisoners and were not incarcerated. Except that they could not leave the Island, the men who inhabited it led a contented and productive life. They built farms and lived on them, grew crops and lived in fair comfort. In 1903 there arrived a voluntary convoy of women, who were destined to be life prisoners on the Island. The exiles married, settled down on the small farms, and for a time conditions there continued to improve. A normal and thriving community was in the process of being established.

This ideal penal colony was doomed to failure, however, when in the early part of the century the settlement outgrew its confines. Overcrowded conditions resulted from the constant influx of new arrivals to the Island. There was no longer an adequate market in which to sell the small crops, and men whose criminal tendencies had for a time been halted by their improved conditions, stopped work and began again their nefarious pursuits. It was then that the dungeons and compounds that we associate with Devil's Island were built, and its cruel regime was begun.

Today it is a Salvation Army major, working under the French government, who is in charge of the three year program to liquidate Devil's Island. In 1938 the law to permit this task was first entered in the French statutes, but because of the war, was never put into effect. Almost 3,000

convicts who have completed their terms will be the first to leave the settlement as the program is put into operation. These men, of all nationalities, had been sentenced by the French courts and her colonies, but because of the stoppage of shipping during the war, French Guiana became isolated, and they were almost forgotten. Their rations and medical supplies grew continually more inadequate, and life became mere survival for most of them. Current shipping is still short, and it may be another year before even half of these men will be released from the Island.

Some 2,500 others are still serving sentences. Many of these will be pardoned within the three year period; some will be moved to prisons within France; and a few will remain in Guiana, but only if illness or old age requires special care or hospitalization. The vast majority of these convicts are felons; a few hundred are habitual petty criminals; only a handful are political prisoners who were sentenced for treason.

As early as 1928 the Salvation Army major who is directing the present project took his first trip to the settlement. Even then he began the work of rehabilitating the prisoners known as "liberes"—those who had completed their sentences. Under the "doublage" law of France these men were required to serve an equivalent length of service in Guiana, during which time they would earn their fares back to France. Such a situation was almost impossible, for there was no means of earning the barest livelihood there. Led by the major, the Salvation Army established plantations where the men could work and earn money enough to return home. Nor did the Salvation Army stop there. Once back in France they helped these liberated men to secure jobs and become readjusted to life away from the Island. Until the war began at least 800 of these liberes had found their way back to home and freedom again. In the ten year period between 1928 and 1938 prison conditions continued to improve until Devil's Island rivaled other penal institutions in adequacy.

But the war halted the constructive work being accomplished there. A swift downward trend in the institution began again. Reports kept coming through of the utter degradation and misery that was widespread in Devil's Island. The situation appeared absolutely hopeless, and France passed a law forbidding its further use as a penal colony. With the aid of the Salvation Army and its major's leadership, France set the course by which that infamous place would for once and all be abandoned, never to be established again as a penal institution.

—A. Morris



He pounded furiously at the ice but the chain refused to give

THE deputy rang the ferry bell with his right hand because his left was locked to Bat Elzey's wrist. After ringing the bell he flicked his flashlight's beam over the frozen river bank and the ferry landing.

Ice gleamed over the water along the edge of the freshly chopped boat-way. It was forming fast, thin and brittle, in the passage groove. Elzey blinked at it, wondered how often the ferry boat had to be run to keep the way clear.

"I'm cold," he mumbled. "I wish that ferryman would hurry."

"A light's coming down from the house over there," said the deputy. "You won't freeze to death waiting another five minutes."

The deputy's left wrist was numb with the cold, chafed from the handcuffs. He flicked the light along the landing, saw an ice trapped barge and a chain running from it up to a large sycamore tree. Steel staples held the

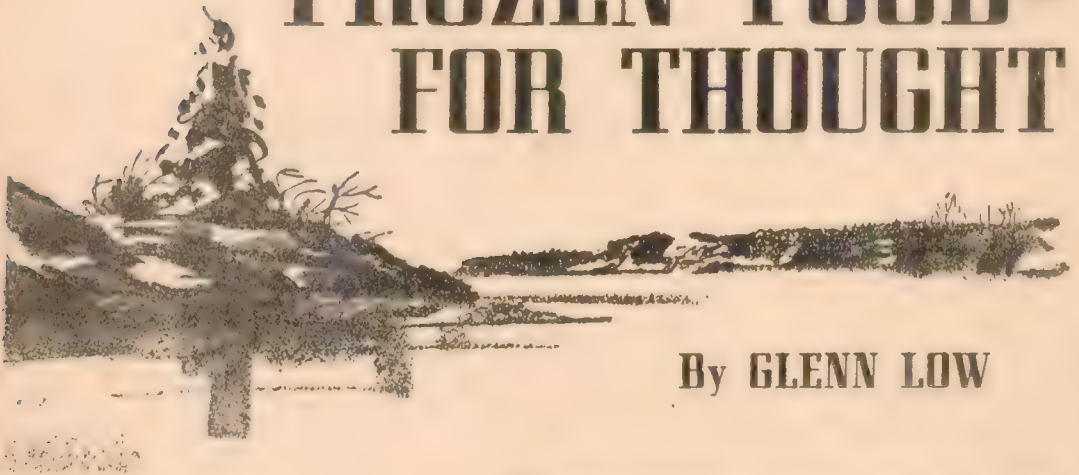
chain to the tree-trunk. He walked over to the barge, pulling Elzey along roughly, stopped and loosened the chain from its mooring ring, then holding its end link between his knees he reached and unlocked the handcuffs. When he snapped them back on the killer's wrist, threaded the empty cuff through the chain and locked it, Elzey gave with a hard groan.

"My wrist is cold and sore, too," he complained. "How about taking the cuffs off me for a while? How about giving me a chance to warm my wrist a little?"

"Did you give old man Belrode a chance?" asked the deputy as he began massaging warmth into the numb flesh of his arm. "No, you shot him in the back—shot him when he wasn't looking."

"You'll never get the money," growled Elzey. "I'll die before I tell where I hid it."

FROZEN FOOD- FOR THOUGHT



By **GLENN LOW**

**The elements conspired to give
Bat Elzey his freedom. But there are
times when Nature corrects its own mistakes**

"Over at the county seat," replied the deputy, "they have ways of making rats like you squeal." He glanced out over the night-blackened river, saw the ferryman's lantern riding the boat's prow. In another ten minutes he would have the killer off his hands. He let his thoughts play with how he would spend the reward. One thousand dollars it had been three days ago when he'd left Stoetzer with the posse. Maybe it had been raised since.

Elzey was still talking. "It's only luck you got me. If I hadn't slipped on the ice I'd have killed you, too. I had a bead on you when you came out of Belrode's house. If I only hadn't slipped. . . ." Suddenly he began cursing bitterly, condemning the ice and the cold.

"You can't beat a joner," the deputy said. "Ice is bad luck for you, old guy. First it was on the river and you couldn't walk or swim your horse over. That kept you in these parts long enough for us to catch you after you murdered Belrode and stole his money. Next it was on the ground below Belrode's spring-house and you slipped on it when you were ready to bushwhack me. You want to watch out for ice, Elzey. It might collect on the rope when they hang you and bring on a long, slow choke."

THE barge chain had been wet when the freeze came on, that's why it didn't rattle when Elzey caught three links of it in his right hand and raised his hands over the deputy's head. The deputy had just glanced out at the approaching boat when the cold links opened his skull to the sub-zero atmosphere.

The lantern, its golden glow flickering softly over the frog-skin ice in the boat-groove, the little silver and gold spangles on the clotted frost, the hard

glitter of the wet oars flashing, was the last picture life showed to the man from the sheriff's office. As he toppled forward, Elzey grunted with joy and moved upon him. In the next moment he had the key to the manacles and the deputy's gun.

"See?" the killer chortled softly. "See what happens to the fool who tries to stop Bat Elzey?" He fumbled the key over the handcuffs-lock. His fingers were stiff, clumsy with cold. The key missed the slot and slipped from his grip.

He sought it hastily, patting over the ground with the flats of his hands, whispering an oath. When he did not immediately find it he changed his purpose and began clawing at the dead man's clothes.

He found the flashlight, then changed his mind again. If he used the light to find the key the man in the boat might see the corpse. He cursed impatiently as he squatted in the darkness to wait.

Snapping the thin channel ice the boat moved into shore. The figure at the oars turned its head. "Golly it's cold!" exclaimed a pleasant voice. "Get in quick."

Elzey caught the prow with his manacled hand, jerked the boat high onto the icy mud. The gun in his free hand gleamed wickedly above the lantern. "A girl!" he gasped. Then he chuckled. His teeth made a saffron gash across his big loose face.

"Father isn't feeling well. He was in bed, so he sent me—" The girl's voice seemed to freeze; her dark eyes widened. She saw the deputy's head as the light touched the fresh blood.

"Get out of the boat. No jitters now." Elzey's words were hard little grunts. The girl did not move. Shock had grabbed her face, twisted it, left it trembling. "You get out!" commanded

the killer. "Come here to me."

SHE was nineteen, perhaps; slender and pretty. She wore a bearskin coat, and it swung away from her trim figure as she attempted to balance herself. Underneath it was a print frock and a frilly little apron no larger than a man's handkerchief. Elzey's eyes gloated over her as she stepped limply toward him.

"Didn't expect a girl no how," he said, putting away the gun. "Came mighty near shooting you, too." When she stood beside him he lifted the lantern off the prow and kicked the boat out into the channel. For a minute, glancing at the opposite shore, he held his hands over the lantern, flexing his fat fingers, working warmth into them. Afterwards he began a fruitless search for the key. Finally he gave it up and went back to the sycamore, examined the staples that fastened the chain. "This'll be a cinch," he grunted. In less than a minute, using an icy stone, he had hammered out the staples. He returned to the girl, dragging the twenty-foot barge chain behind him.

"We're going for a little walk," he said. "If you be nice maybe I'll let you go. If we run into any of that posse I don't guess they'll be so anxious to sling lead at me if you're close by." Holding the lantern close he studied her face, chuckling at her fear. "You're the ferryman's girl. Maybe the sheriff is a friend of yours?" She did not reply. A moment later he glanced out over the river. "How much water is running free in the middle?"

"A little," she said shakily.

"Narrow enough for a man to jump across?"

"No."

"Good. Then they'll need a boat."

"The river seldom freezes in the middle," she said. "But it will tonight.

It was twenty below when I left the other side."

He went back to the dead deputy, secured a large pocketknife that had been taken from him, then he told her to walk ahead along a narrow, ice-sheeted path. "I'll get rid of this chain and the handcuffs when I've got proper tools. Now there's more important work to do." He spat out a hard oath, reviling the dead man, as he coiled the barge chain over his shoulder.

"My father has another boat," said the girl, hopelessness striking in her voice. "He'll come looking for me soon now."

Elzey laughed. "He'd better not find you," he said. "Because if he does he finds us, and that won't be healthy for him."

A MILE below the ferry where a path led up from a private boat-landing he told the girl to stop. "Here's where we take to the ice," he said. "You're lightest so you go first."

She said, "It's not dangerous. It's freezing fast underneath."

His reply caused her to hesitate. "The posse salted some places hereabouts. Did it to trap me if I tried to cross. There're some rotten spots. If you go through I'll try to help you out."

There was nothing else to do, so she went on, walking like a cat on hot coals. He followed at a safe distance, flicking the light just ahead of her feet, guiding her like a man drives a mule, saying *gee* and *haw* when she veered from his desired direction.

Almost midway the river he told her to stop. Cautiously then he walked up to her. "Freezing mighty fast to underlay those salted strips," he commented. She did not reply. He moved on until ahead of him, no more than three yards, the flash's beam glittered on the newly frozen channel ice. "The channel's

frozen over all right," he told her. "But it's thin as tissue out there."

He slipped the chain from his shoulder, threw it ahead of him, checking it with his free hand before it jerked the manacles and tore his wrist. There was a soft splash as it skittered to a stop. "Safe enough back here, though," he mumbled.

He turned the light on the ice at his feet, stooped over. The girl watched, horrified fascination working on her pale, cold face. She hadn't asked questions, and he hadn't told her anything, really; but he was aware that she had guessed his identity, knew he was the killer against whom the whole countryside had been alerted.

Suddenly the spot of light stopped moving, centering a bright object which protruded slightly from the ice. She recognized the object as the neck and knuckle-hold of a large glass jug.

"An empty jug with a good cork makes a nice float," he said. "I anchored this one out here before the freeze three days ago."

He knelt, drew out his pocketknife, and began chipping at the ice about an inch back from the jug-neck. "A wire's fastened to the knuckle-hold," he said. "A wire that goes down to a stone jar on the river bottom." He paused, glanced up at her. "Now you can see why they never found Belrode's money. It's down there in the stone jar."

He worked for perhaps five minutes, then suddenly straightened up, said, "Blow out your lantern. Don't want anybody coming up on us now."

She blew it out. He switched off the flashlight. "You try to run away and I'll catch you with a bullet," he told her. "Keep in mind that it doesn't take long to snick on a flashlight."

Minutes later the girl said, "I'm getting cold—awful cold. May I walk around?"

"IF YOU walk in a circle," he said. "I'll know if you get too far away."

She began walking. The sounds of her steps blended strangely with the sounds of his work. This continued for a long time, then suddenly the chipping ceased, and Elzey swore a hard oath. "Knife blade snapped," he said disgustedly. His words came slow and awkwardly as if his lips weren't working properly. "I'll have to use the gun to dig with."

She walked as he began hacking at the ice with the gun-barrel. "Ought to have got something decent to work with while I still had time," he mumbled.

Once he swore at his stiffening hands. "Gloves don't help much," he said. "Wish we could chance lighting the lantern." He kept on hacking away.

A long time later he said, "I'm getting mighty cold. I—I think you'd better light the lantern. Got to take a chance. My legs feel like they're frozen off."

She came back to him and he told her to get a match from his coat pocket. "My hands are too cold," he said. She found a match and lit the lantern. "Now give me your coat," he commanded.

She hesitated, probably realizing his near helpless condition. She must have known that she could have escaped, that his hands were too stiff to handle the gun, his legs too numb to allow his overtaking her in a chase. He swore clumsily. "I say—give me your coat! You can keep warm walking." He stared above the lantern, his eyes wide, fierce, his body hunched over the tiny flame.

She took off her coat, a sob whistling softly behind her stiff lips. He took it, threw it over his back, then hunched over the lantern, shielding its light with his body and the skirts of the garment. After a long time he gave her back the coat, said, his voice smoother now,

(Concluded on page 176)

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"Aw, Hell, I'll Walk!"

By ROBERT MOORE WILLIAMS

The kid gave a startled gasp and flew violently back from the moving car



For a guy who was buried to his ears in shady deals, Sorgenson certainly had some odd ideas about morals, honesty and the Golden Rule

McCLAIN was brazenly walking past Sorgenson's office when the door opened and a taxicab driver came out. He was all full of bustle and go, was that driver, and he didn't look where he was going, with the result that he bumped into McClain.

"Cops! Sorry," McClain said.

"Okay," the driver answered casually. Then he recognized McClain.

"Oh, it's you," he said.

He led with his left.

McClain was so surprised he forgot to duck. The fist landed high up on his cheek bone and went up along the edge of his right eye, skidding like a truck on a wet street. McClain took a step backward, his foot slipped, and he sat down heavily.

"Yah!" the taxicab driver said, a smirk of satisfaction on his face. "That pays you off."

McClain's first thought was that the taxi driver was working for Sorgenson and finding him outside the door of the lawyer's office, had naturally assumed he was snooping and had socked him for that. This was unfair. McClain had not been snooping. He was just looking the building over to see what kind of an office Sorgenson maintained and where it was located and if there was a vacant office on the same floor that he could maybe rent and use to watch who came and went.

McClain was interested in Sorgenson. The Great Inter-Allied Insurance Company had hired him to be interested in Sorgenson on the suspicion that the lawyer was faking liability claims against them. The insurance company didn't mind paying an honest liability claim—if their hired ferrets couldn't find a legal loophole to jump through—but the thought of paying a faked claim drove them wild. And since Sorgenson had hooked them on

six claims, they were plenty hot. In grim truth, they had hired McClain to obtain evidence that could be used to bar the attorney from practicing law and maybe get him free room and board in Joliet for a few years, if the evidence McClain dug up was good enough.

McClain sat on the floor and thought about these things and tried to focus his right eye.

"Yah!" the taxicab driver repeated, looking very pleased with himself.

McClain's right eye was focusing a little better now and he recognized the driver. At the same time, he realized the paste in the eye had not been connected with the interests of the Great Inter-Allied Insurance Company but was a pay-off on old business. He had once smacked this same driver for trying to tell him he didn't get any change out of a five dollar bill when the meter read two-ninety. The driver had remembered.

McClain was preparing to get to his feet and give this driver even better cause to remember him in the future when the door of Sorgenson's office opened. The lawyer had heard the commotion in the hall and had come out to see what it was all about.

So McClain didn't get up. This was the first time he had ever seen Sorgenson and he wanted time to take a good look.

Sorgenson was a big man. Not fat, just big. McClain guessed him at two hundred and twenty in his skin. Underneath his clothes, his muscles looked hard. He was about forty and there were a few gray hairs at his temples. His eyes were a keen blue with a bright sparkle in them which McClain liked. All in all, he looked like a good joe and McClain was a little sorry he was a crook and that the Great Inter-Allied Insurance Company was after his hide. They would get him, of course. Their

millions moved by red tape and routine and once the button was punched, the millions kept grinding until grist resulted.

"You hurt?" the lawyer asked, concern in his voice.

The taxicab driver snickered.

"Not bad," McClain answered. He didn't like that snicker. He got to his feet.

THE distance was a little too great so he took one step forward. Then the distance was just right. He patted the driver on the chin. Or that was what he intended to do but his right eye was still not focusing correctly and his fist, instead of landing on the button, went up along the driver's jaw and almost knocked his ear off.

The taxicab man skipped rope going backwards. But he still wasn't satisfied and he came in again, leading with his left like he knew that was the thing to do. McClain was expecting it and he side-stepped and the driver almost hit Sorgenson.

"Cut it out, Arnold," the attorney advised. "Can't you see he knows how to handle his fists?"

"He's a damned private dick!" the driver answered.

Sorgenson looked interested.

"And I'm going to black his other eye," the driver added.

"It's okay by me, if you insist," McClain said, dropping his weight on the springs in his legs. "Only after you've heard those birdies sing, don't say I didn't warn you."

"That's what you say!" the driver answered. He started to lunge at McClain.

Sorgenson reached out and grabbed him by the seat of the pants. The door of the lawyer's office was still open and he lifted the taxicab driver up and shoved him inside.

McClain blinked at the lawyer. "You a weight lifter on the side?" he asked.

The lawyer took his time about answering. He looked McClain over, his keen blue eyes not missing a single frayed spot on the detective's neat but worn gray flannel suit. He studied McClain's face with minute care.

"It's the only face I got," McClain said.

"I'm sure of that," the lawyer answered.

McClain felt himself getting hot. "You don't like it, maybe?" he said.

The lawyer laughed. "Between you and me, I've seen faces in high positions of public trust that I liked a lot less. No, it isn't your face that worries me."

"What does worry you, then?"

The laugh went out of Sorgenson's voice. "What were you doing outside my door?"

"Walking down the hall," McClain said promptly.

"Yeah?"

"What business is that of yours?" McClain asked.

The lawyer studied him for a minute. "Come in," he said abruptly.

"Why?" McClain asked.

"I want to talk to you," Sorgenson answered. "And also I want my stenographer to patch up that eye for you."

"Huh—"

"She's taking a course in first aid and she needs somebody to practice on," the lawyer said.

For a second, McClain was tempted to say that a steno working for an ambulance chaser obviously needed a course in first aid. He kept this remark to himself. After all, he wanted a chance to see the inside of Sorgenson's office. Shrugging, he walked through the door, but the lawyer didn't kick him in the pants, just for devilry,

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Dr. Frank B. Robinson

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as he was half-way expecting.

EXCEPT for the steno, the office was so shabbily furnished that McClain was surprised. No ambulance chaser who needed a front to impress the customers could afford to operate in a dump like this. But Sorgenson was operating in it, and damned successfully too, according to the claims department of the Great Inter-Allied Insurance Company. To McClain, the shabby office didn't make sense.

The stenographer didn't make sense either. She was a red-head and the kind of a pip you expect to see working at a fancy salary as a receptionist in some swell joint where they pay real money for front. What in the hell was she doing working for a shyster?

She was busy putting a band-aid on the taxicab driver's ear when McClain walked into the office. She looked up.

"This is a beauty," she said.

"Aw, his ear's not bad," McClain protested. "I aimed for his chin but my sights were off."

"I was referring to your eye," she answered and McClain would have got red if his face hadn't been so tanned and hard.

"Sit down," Sorgenson said, closing the door.

"Thanks. I was wondering if it would be all right." McClain sat down and lit a cigarette. The red head finished putting the last band-aid on the taxi driver's ear.

"You're fixed up now," she said.

"I'll see you later, Arnold. I'll call you as soon as anything comes up," Sorgenson said.

"Okay." The taxi driver paused long enough to scowl at McClain, then went out the door.

"Here's another victim for you, Elaine," Sorgenson said, motioning toward McClain.

"My eye is all right," McClain protested. His protest didn't get him anywhere. The red head promptly brought her box of band-aids over to where he was sitting and Sorgenson, grinning, went into his private office and closed the door.

McClain looked the steno over again. "Put that first-aid junk away, sweetheart," he said. "You're all the treatment a sore eye needs."

Although she tried to pretend she didn't, he could see she liked it.

"What are you doing tonight?" he asked.

"Nothing you would be interested in," she snapped.

"Don't be too rough on me," McClain pleaded. "I need a girl to work for me and you look like just the number to fill the job. You like the boss you got now?"

"I certainly do," she said, dripping iodine on the gash on the side of his cheek where the taxicab driver's fist had skidded.

McClain frowned. "I don't get it," he said.

"You don't get what?" the girl asked.

"A swell number like you working in a dump like this," the detective answered. "You ought to be over on the avenue where your class would be appreciated instead of working for a shyster who can't pay you more than twenty-five a week—"

Smack!

FOR a second, McClain thought she had slapped his teeth out. Then she tore into him as only a thoroughly angry red-headed woman can.

"I'll have you know that Mr. Sorgenson is not a shyster. He's one of the nicest men who ever lived. And if there were more lawyers like him this would be a better world—"

"All right," McClain said. "I didn't

know you were married to him."

"Married to him!" the red head gasped. "I'll thank you to remember that he has a wife and two splendid children—"

"Then I didn't know *that* was the way it was," the detective amended, grinning.

When she grasped his meaning, her face got white and he thought she was going to spit. So he knew she wasn't Sorgenson's mistress and *that* wasn't the reason she was working for him. And she wasn't married to the lawyer, so that was out. Then why was she willing to stick around in a shabby office when she could get a damned sight better job? Was it because she honestly liked Sorgenson and stuck with him against her own interests?

"You rat!" she said. "Why—" She was so angry she couldn't talk.

"Take it easy, sweetheart," McClain said. "I was just wondering."

"What were you wondering about?" Sorgenson asked.

Hearing her slap McClain, the lawyer had come silently out of his private office.

McClain got quickly to his feet. Of course the steno would yelp to her boss. Then there would be trouble and he wanted to be on his feet when it started.

"Did he try to get fresh with you, Elaine?" the lawyer asked.

"He called you a shyster," the steno said hotly.

"Is that all?"

"All?" She looked confused. "Isn't that enough?"

"I mean, did he try to pinch you or put his hands on you?"

"Oh, no. Nothing like that," the girl said hastily.

"Okay," the lawyer said to McClain. "So I don't have to knock your teeth out."

"I don't get it," McClain said. "If



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I call you a shyster, nothing happens. But if I try to pat your steno on the fanny, you've got to knock my teeth out for it."

"There's a difference," Sorgenson said. "I know I'm not a shyster so I don't have to defend myself. But if you try to get fresh with Elaine, I have to defend her not only because she is my friend but because that is my duty as an honest man."

McClain shook his head. He had as keen a sense of honor as most men but this bewildered him. It was all the more bewildering because of the certainty of the fact that Sorgenson had been dealing in fake liability claims. Didn't the attorney know they were fakes? Or what? The attorney talked and acted like an honest man. There was even something of Sir Galahad in him, something of the knight in shining armor helping ladies in distress. How in the hell did it happen that he was a crook? Or was he a crook?

"You wanted to talk to me," McClain said.

"Yes. I still want to know what you were doing outside my door?"

"I told you that."

Sorgenson looked him over carefully. "I hate a liar," he said.

"So do I," McClain answered.

"Arnold said you were a private eye," the lawyer said.

"I am," McClain admitted.

"Were you snooping out there in the hall?"

"Does that worry you?" McClain asked.

"No," the lawyer said.

"I thought you hated a liar."

Sorgenson colored then and for a second McClain thought the lawyer was going to swing on him. But Sorgenson changed his mind about that. "Get out," he said.

McClain shrugged, opened the door,

and walked out. Now that he had seen and talked to Sorgenson, he knew this was going to be a tough case to crack. Somehow it didn't smell right to him. Sorgenson didn't look and act like a shyster. He looked like a fighting he-man. But you couldn't tell. Crooks were where you found them. Sorgenson didn't look like a crook but he was certainly worried about the possibility that McClain had been snooping outside his door. Which meant that he had something to hide. What?

IN THE hallway outside the lawyer's office, McClain got his first real clue on what Sorgenson was hiding. A fifteen-year-old kid was coming down the hall.

"I'm looking for Mr. Sorgenson's office," he said.

The kid walked with a limp. His right arm was hung in a dirty sling and there was a cut on his face and a bruise on his forehead.

"What do you want, sonny?" McClain asked.

"Bill Arnold sent me up to see Mr. Sorgenson," the kid answered. "He said Mr. Sorgenson was looking for people who had been hurt. Do you know where his office is?"

"How'd you get hurt, sonny?" McClain questioned.

"I fell down the back stairs," the kid answered. "Where's Mr. Sorgenson's office?"

"In there," McClain answered, jerking his thumb toward the door he had just closed.

"Well, I'm damned!" he thought, watching the injured youngster walk into Sorgenson's office.

Arnold, the taxicab driver, had sent up a kid with a lot of bruises on his body. There was nothing wrong with this, except in McClain's eyes. He wondered what the lawyer was going to

do with the boy. What use would Sorgenson have for a kid who had fallen down some steps and skinned himself up, thus producing some very authentic bruises?

"I'm doubly damned!" McClain repeated.

He went down on the street to his ramshackle car and got his camera. It was a first-class camera, one of the best, and it had cost the detective six hundred bucks. In his business, pictures were often excellent evidence. He waited for the kid to come out of the building. He wanted a picture of that, for he had a hunch he knew how those bruises were going to be used.

The Great Inter-Allied Insurance Company had paid off on six claims involving bruises already.

This company wrote liability insurance of automobiles. When one of the car owners they insured hit somebody, they protected him up to the limit of their policy. If the person who had been hit yelled that he was half killed, and went to the hospital, and kept on yelling, and if a lawyer got hold of the case and told him how to yell, the insurance company paid off to the tune of thousands of dollars. The six cases Sorgenson had brought against them had cost them about twenty-eight thousand dollars. All had been perfect cases and all had been settled out of court, which proved that Sorgenson knew how to handle a liability claim. The Great Inter-Allied Insurance Company thought it proved he was a crook too.

Then the kid came out of the building.

McClain got three pictures of him, bandages and all. When the kid got on a street car, the detective jumped into his own pile of junk and followed the car, meanwhile hoping fervently that his automobile wouldn't quit cold

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on him. He needed a new car in the worst way—a private dick without an automobile just can't operate. If this case worked out just right, he would have a new car. The insurance company was willing to pay twenty-five hundred, plus expenses, for Sorgenson's scalp. This kind of money would buy a new car, even at black market prices.

McClain followed the street car until the kid got off. It was a tenement district. The kid walked down the street to an old three-story brick building. "He probably lives there," the detective decided.

A battered old independent cab was parked in front of the building. The driver was sitting in the front seat.

When the kid started to pass the car, the driver saw him and yelled at him.

The driver was Arnold.

McClain hastily jerked his hat brim down over his eyes and pulled his car in to the curb. He saw the kid get in the cab.

He knew, then what was going to happen.

Thirty minutes later he watched it happen.

KEEPING carefully out of sight,

McClain trailed the cab out to an exclusive residential section. The kid got out of the cab then and walked a couple of blocks. Somebody had given him a watch, which he was checking very carefully. Set well back from the street on the right, was a big house. A hedge-lined driveway led to the garage at the rear. McClain took one look at the driveway and knew he was seeing a liability trap. The hedge was so high that the driver of a car coming down the drive could not see the street.

The kid idled along in front of the house. While he was in the cab, he had taken his arm out of the sling.

Arnold tooled his cab along behind him like he was looking for a certain number and having a hard time finding it. McClain parked two blocks away.

A limousine with a uniformed chauffeur came out of the drive. The kid stepped into the side of the car and was knocked down. The chauffeur didn't know he had hit anybody until the kid began to yell. Arnold got his cab into action, spurted up to the scene of the accident, slammed on his brakes and jumped out.

The chauffeur saw something was wrong. He stopped his car and came back.

Arnold stopped just long enough to get his license number, then picked up the kid, put him in the back of his cab, and went high-tailing away heading for a doctor.

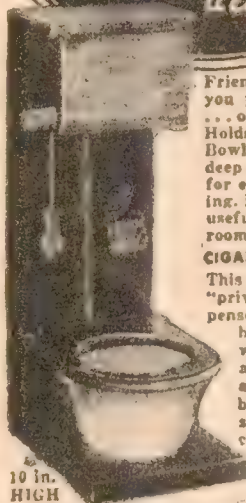
It was as simple as that. The kid had stepped into the side of the car and that was all there was to it. But by the time Sorgenson got through with the case in court, the Great Inter-Allied Insurance Company would be hooked for five to ten thousand dollars. Sorgenson would point out that the hedge-lined drive was really a death trap. And the kid would have bruises on him, bad bruises. The chauffeur might deny that he had hit the youngster, he would protest that he had been driving carefully, but what good would his arguments do him? He worked for a millionaire—the limousine proved that—and the kid was penniless. By the time Sorgenson got through working on the sympathy of the jury, they would be saying, "Ten thousand dollars," without batting an eye. Only the insurance company would never let a case like this go to a jury. They would settle out of court.

McClain had seen it happen too often to doubt that it could happen again.

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All he had to do was wait until Sоргenson filed his claim on this accident, then produce his evidence to prove fraud.

HE WENT home and wrote a complete account of what he had seen, pounding out the story on his portable typewriter. Then he converted the bathroom of his little bachelor apartment into a dark room and developed the pictures he had taken. They were dandy pics. They showed the youngster with his arm in the sling, and being taken prior to the accident, they made interesting evidence.

McClain grinned when he thought of the way Sorgenson's face was going to look when he saw those pictures and looked at McClain's report. Then he went out and ate himself a steak and went to a movie.

At ten o'clock the next morning he called the claims department of Inter-Allied. They were upset down there. Sorgenson had just filed a claim against them for fifteen thousand dollars. One of their insureds had hit a kid and the kid was in the hospital and the doctor said his back was hurt and what the hell were they paying McClain for anyhow?

McClain hung up. He put his pictures and his written report in his pocket and went out and got in his car. And the damned thing wouldn't start. He got out and kicked it in the fender and left it there.

He figured he would be driving a new car when he came home. He didn't even mind riding the street car down to Sorgenson's office. The red headed steno was busy typing when he went in. She looked at him and went right on typing.

"What are you doing tonight, sweetheart?" McClain asked.

She went right on typing.

McClain sighed and laid one of the pictures and a copy of his report on the desk in front of her.

"Take 'em in to the big man, will you?" he asked.

She looked at the picture and glanced at the report. Then she was gone into Sorgenson's private office.

The lawyer came out of his office in a hurry. He was walking like a big cat and his face was hard and flat. McClain eased his weight up on the balls of his feet. But the lawyer didn't swing at him. He teetered back and forth, looking first at the picture, then at the report, then at McClain. The red-headed stone was breathing hard, like she had run some kind of a race and lost.

Sorgenson took a long breath.

"How much?" he said.

"Um," McClain said. He hadn't been expecting this question, but now that it had come up, he thought up an answer for it.

"I'm getting a twenty-five hundred bonus for your diploma," he said.

"I'll make it five thousand," the lawyer answered.

McClain, a little staggered, said this was nice of Sorgenson, only the picture and the report were going to cost Inter-Allied maybe fifteen thousand, if they didn't get them.

"A hold-up, eh?" the lawyer said. "Six thousand."

McClain said this was nicer but he still wanted to know why Sorgenson was picking on Inter-Allied.

"I can't go any higher," the lawyer protested.

"No?" McClain said.

"I haven't got it," the lawyer said.

"You took twenty-eight thousand from Inter-Allied," McClain pointed out. "Your cut was at least fifty per cent of that, which adds up to about fourteen grand. What do you mean,

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you haven't got it?"

He didn't look at the red-headed stenographer as he spoke, which was just as well, for the sight of her face would not have made him happy.

"The only cut I got out of that twenty-eight thousand was expenses," the lawyer said.

"And you're the man who told me you hated a liar!" McClain answered.

"You go to hell!" Sorgenson said. "All I got out of that money was expenses and you can believe it or you can lump it."

McCLAIN was shocked. All the time he had secretly thought the lawyer was talking like an honest man. He still thought it. But what the hell kind of honesty was this?

"What happened to it?" he snapped.

"You're working for Inter-Allied, you ought to know what happened to it," Sorgenson answered. "Didn't they tell you about Rose Arnold?"

"Huh?" McClain said.

"You remember that taxicab driver?"

"Yes."

"She's his kid. Fifteen years old—"

"So what?"

"So nothing," Sorgenson answered.

"Only she got hit by a car. An honest accident. And Inter-Allied had the liability policy on that car. I filed a claim on it but one of their legal hyenas showed them how they could keep from paying off. They didn't pay off either. The fact that the kid had a broken back and that she was going to have a whole series of damned expensive operations meant nothing to them. The fact that the liability claim was honest meant nothing to them either. They could get out of paying off and they got out of it."

"Huh?" McClain said.

"And that's where the money from


"Have a drink," he said. It was rye.

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so McClain took it. Then Sorgenson went back into his private office, but he left the door open this time. McClain could hear him calling Inter-Ally and telling them he was dropping the claim he had just filed against them.

McClain had figured the lawyer would do just that, for he had always acted like an honest man. So Inter-Ally was rid of the man who was filing fake claims against them. And if Rose Arnold didn't have enough money to pay the doctor bills, it would just be up to Sorgenson and him to scout around and see if they could dig up the dough for her.

Then the red-headed stenographer, looking a little dazed and flustered, came over and whispered in his ear. McClain was surprised as hell, for she told him she wasn't doing anything tonight, after all, and that she liked to ride street cars.

THE END.

TORCH KILLERS

By FRANK LANE

THE human body is highly combustible, a fact known to few people. Among those few, however, has been a percentage who have used that quality to attempt to destroy the evidence of their crimes. The murder committed, they set the fire, and by the time the police arrive there are only a few charred remains. Yet should a skilled criminologist enter the case he may enlist the aid of science to catch the killer as surely as though he had left his calling card behind him.

Preliminary to everything else, of course, is some sort of identification. Sometimes so little of the body remains that the officer must be sure he is handling a human body and not one of an animal. Seldom does such a mistake occur, yet there have been such cases. When there is any doubt a pathologist's examination of the smallest bits of bone readily gives the information.

What would seem to be a more baffling question is whether the individual was a man or a woman. Nature itself assists the examiner here, for even when the body is almost completely destroyed by fire, the uterus in a woman and the prostate in a man are the last organs to be destroyed. Should

all the soft tissues of the body be destroyed, the careful officer can still find the characteristic formations of pelvic and thigh bones which distinguish the sexes.

A tooth, a few bones and shreds of tissue play strikingly important parts in the examination. Valuable information is obtained from the doctor and dentist, so that details of size, height and age are accurately approximated by the scientific investigator.

Then, when identification has gone as far as possible, the next task is to determine whether the victim met his death before or during the fire—whether he was murdered or accidentally burned to death. Two infallible tests indicate whether death preceded burning. If alive before the fire, some smoke would have been inhaled. An examination of even a small amount of lung tissue would reveal carbon granules in the air spaces.

A blood analysis would be more accurate. For even when practically the entire body—head, arms, legs and most of the internal organs are burned away, enough blood remains to obtain a good specimen for testing. The rate of carbon monoxide found in the red blood cells would be greatly above normal should even a small amount of the smoke-laden air be breathed.

Finally, was the fire victim also a victim of murder? Here again, by means of the blood analysis a number of astounding facts can be ascertained. Was the man intoxicated before his death? Was he poisoned or chloroformed? It is often through the simple blood test that these apparently insoluble questions are answered.

THE skilled criminologist examines the body for possible fractures and is able to determine accurately injuries to the skull—even when the scalp itself is practically destroyed—by the amount of bleeding or congestion underneath the spot where the blow was struck.

By an examination of lung tissue it can be learned whether the soft parts of the body were injured before death occurred. A violent blow causes fat globules to become dislodged and forced into the blood stream to the heart and then to the lungs where they remain. In cases where the skin and all the fat deposits beneath it have been burned away, a microscopic examination of lung tissue may still reveal these minute globules, and good evidence of foul play.

The X-ray, too, takes on increased importance by disclosing bits of steel or imbedded bullets, where an external examination of a badly burned body might divulge nothing.

Thus, step by step, science reconstructs the crime; and the murderer finds that even fire cannot blot out his trail. Ironically enough, where death might have been due to natural causes, the deliberate origin of the fire proves criminal intent.



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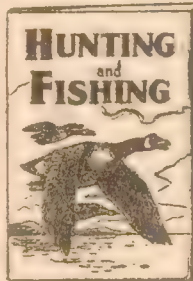
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Frozen Food—For Thought

By GLENN LOW

(Concluded from page 158)

"Take it. Use it like I did. It's a good way to get warm."

She obeyed, hiding the light, thankful for the warmth that rose under the coat around her. He returned to his work with new spirit. After striking less than a dozen licks he gave forth with a glad oath. At the same instant the gun slipped from his hand and skittered across the ice toward her.

She heard it coming, moved toward it. He was after it in a flash, scrambling over the ice, cursing thickly. Her coat fell away and the gun shone in the swath of released light. She grabbed for it, but his hand was quicker. His fat fingers curled stiffly, stopped less than an inch from the weapon, jerked oddly. The barge chain snapped behind him. Darting out like the head of a frightened snake, her hand shot forward. He clutched it with his free hand, broke the gun from her grip.

"Try to kill me, will you!" he screamed, pushing the gun up. He pulled the trigger. A roar. A scream of pain. The gun, its barrel bloated like the neck of a pouter pigeon, crunched the ice, bounced at her feet.

"Ice in the barrel," he sobbed, nursing a mangled, bloody hand.

SHE backed away, staring shocked and surprised at the blasted gun. "Don't go!" Elzey shouted at her. "Don't go! I—I—" Suddenly he was quiet, whirling back, hunching over the ice like a leashed beast, the chain trailing in the dripping blood. In the next moment he'd pulled up the stone jar, smashed it on the ice. "See!" he chattered wildly, clawing up a double handful of bills. "See! It's the money I

got from Belrode. I'll give some of it—all of it to you if you'll help me."

"You killed him," she said, whispering hoarsely. "You killed my husband."

"No—" His face shook. His mouth was open, but his breath didn't show. On his lips frost gleamed. "No—not Belrode? . . ."

"Not Belrode," she said. "The deputy."

She backed away, and he didn't follow. When the light from her lantern no longer touched him she turned and tried to run.

"Brave girl," said the sheriff. There was no reply, so he continued. "How she ever got her dead husband across the ice I don't know. But she did, then stayed conscious long enough to tell her father where we could find this rat."

He knelt on the ice and began prying a wad of money from Bat Elzey's dead and frozen hand.

"She'll be all right, too," said one of the deputies. "I heard the doc say."

"The poor fool chained himself to the ice," muttered the sheriff. "So crazy to get his hands on the money he never realized how fast the channel was freezing."

The posse-man who carried the axe walked out along the barge chain until he came to the place where the last eight links had broken through the channel ice and frozen fast. It took him quite a long time to chop them out.

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